

Measure for Measure

Chapter I: Opening

I had never been a very strong person.

Well, physically anyway. I was average in height, average in weight, and most remarkably, under average in intelligence. Now that my personal space had been violated my remarkable stupidity, which I suppose those that didn't know better called courage, was showing itself once more.

The man had grabbed my wand.

Well, more precisely he had stolen it. Err, was in the process of stealing it. So naturally when a strange man gras--steals, steals your wand you react badly. Well, to me it seemed to be a very appropriate reaction. I turned and popped the offending 'gentleman' a nice one in the jaw. He fell over backwards and I blinked amazedly. Either I had gotten really strong in the past few weeks, or he had a rather puny jaw. Taking a good look at the strange wizard that had I had hit, I went with the latter option. While he certainly was taller than me, he looked rather wimpy. Almost like one of Dudley's skinny friends. He sat up, apparently startled that I had detected him, and tried to run away. I wasn't having any of that, though. I stepped on his robes, stopping him, mid-rise. Apparently the bugger thought he'd attack me with my own wand, for I heard a curse forming at his lips as he raised it. Once more, I wasn't going to stand for it, and pulled him up and punched him across the jaw. He was a bit more solid than I'd imagined, it hurt my knuckles. I heard something crack as he fell back down. He rose again and fired off some garbled hex I didn't recognize, while I managed to step to the side just in time. A crowd had formed by this time, and I heard several yelps as the spell was fired. It felt rather foul, and as it passed me it smashed into a signpost and started decaying the wood. Right then, he was strong. He knew spells I didn't, and he had my wand. Reaching into my pocket I drew my wand—

"Heh?" My wand? I looked down at it for a moment, confused. Yes, it was indeed my wand, so that meant I had attacked a poor stranger

that was behind me for no reason. While I was going over this it seemed as though the stranger hadn't taken notice of my befuddled state of mind and fired off another spell. Well, shit, scratch that 'poor stranger' part, I had picked a fight with an adult wizard that knew how to duel.

"Praecido," he whined out. An ugly blue black bolt shot my way. I happened to avoid most of it on sheer reflex alone, although a small portion of it grazed my left arm. I felt a sharp sting and saw blood well up out of the fresh cut. He... cut... me... I stared, transfixed by my own blood soaking the cloth around it, until I heard his follow up spell searing the air on its way towards me. I didn't have time to get out of the way, it was do or die. I just hope it's not the second.

"Protego," I incanted firmly and relief washed over me when the translucent shield held. Unfortunately my opponent didn't want me relieved. He fired another one of those strange cutting curses again. I didn't dare drop the shield. Luckily my spell held and the curse dissolved on the glassy dome. Sidestepping sharply to avoid another unknown spell, I fired off a stunner, hoping to catch him on his off angle. It didn't work, and a part of me wondered why he was taking this fight so seriously. It's not as if I was an adult. I didn't know much in the way of battle magic, hell I could barely do domestic charms properly. I'd gotten better during the tournament, of course, but I was nowhere near this guy's level. I had only held Voldemort off by a thread, and Cedric had—no, it wasn't the time to think about this. I moved quickly away from a large orange spell and tried out one of his own spells against him.

"Praecido," I half-growled, imitating the motions and releasing the force behind it, the spell worked, but my arm bucked like an old American cowboy on one of those black and white films. The man, clearly surprised by my choice of spell, didn't move fast enough and the curse tore through one of his sleeves and bit into his arm. The torn sleeve fell away showing the dark inked tattoo of the Dark Mark mingling with his fresh blood. Someone in our audience gasped.

"That would be a reason," I muttered while bringing up the shield again. A more forceful silvery spell stuck it and reflected off to burn at a stray bale of hay. Strange place for hay, but I wasn't complaining. I

moved off to the right and let off a whispered, “Reducto,” hoping to at score another blow on his wounded arm. He lifted his wand crossways and a filmy blue shield formed in front of him. On the bright side it had taken a bit out of him. He yelled his next attack out and my blood froze (figuratively, not literally) for a moment. A Bludgeoning hex, my flimsy shield wouldn’t hold against it. Thinking quickly, I spied with my bespectacled eyes a cart on wheels.

“Accio,” called out hurriedly. I felt a slight tug from the magic and the cart was pulled in front me not a moment too soon. Fate had always barely saved my ass. The spell struck, and splintered wood was thrown in every which direction and it struck again, five more times to be precise. Meanwhile the lanky stranger had let off three more of the cutting curses. I had no choice but to use the same bludgeoning hex if I wanted to stay in one piece. It would take care of the individual spells, in theory, but I had never actually tried it out. It’s summer, you see. Little wet-behind-the-ears whelps like me can’t use magic over holiday.

“Extundo.” The spell left me in a flurry of scarlet force and collided with each spell in turn, negating them. I moved back and banished the ruined cart at him, while he ducked around it and fired something else at me. I was tiring quickly. I hadn’t had a fight like this in nearly a month. I was a bit out of practice. Singeing my shoulder, I avoided the brunt of the flame and fired off three of the cutters recklessly. It was all I had left in me.

Scowling, he managed to avoid the first one and blocked the second with his blue gel shield, but the third one, I had fired weakly, and it had trailed below the second to split his leg open. He fell down one knee before raising a triumphant smirk at me. Staring at him quizzically he raised his wand again, but not to attack. He pointed it behind me. From a distance, I heard the yelling of authority. Which I was well accustomed to, and greeted it in the only way I knew how.

I ran.

Looking back as I ducked in one of the stores, I saw three figures charging towards the little battlefield, blue M for Ministry badges

shining on their chests. Deciding not to risk it I ran over to the fireplace and tossed the remains of the floo powder into it.

“The Leaky Cauldron.” I did however risk another glance back, in time to see the proud face of a bearded man as he locked the door to his shop. Hey, at least some people still loved me. With a nod of thanks I departed absently brushing my hair over my scar as I went.

I suppose every year has to start out dangerously somehow, it was a shame I didn’t make it ‘til September.

Chapter II: Report

I stumbled out of the fireplace and promptly fell on my ass. At least some things don't change, no matter how hard you try.

I had really tried to land on my feet this time, not for appearances, but to make a speedy getaway. Brushing my pants off, I hauled myself up and made quickly for the door. Although the fight had happened quite a ways from the Cauldron there were bound to Aurors coming. I had started the fight, so unless the Ministry decided to stow their newfound hate for me, I was finished. My arm burned where I was cut, and the actual burn on my other side was giving me problems. I definitely couldn't fight them. My hand had scarcely gripped the old cast iron doorknob when someone grabbed my shoulder and roughly spun me around. Not good. As I caught sight of the woman who grabbed me, the bottom of my stomach dropped out.

"Harry Potter," Rita purred. Oh, hell, not her. Rita Skeeter, forty-three year old reporter for the Daily Prophet. She had made what little bit of a social life I had last year miserable. Telling lies about my relationships, ruining the reputations of my few close friends, and spinning elaborate yarns about my feelings surrounding everything from breathing to Quidditch. Although, luckily we had caught her spying and found out her secret. She was an illegal animagus. Hermione had forced her to tell the real story behind her fake ones, else we'd rat her out to whoever was in charge of Animagus Registration. There wasn't much she could do now, hopefully.

"Rita," I said blandly. Her eyes sparkled.

"Oh, so familiar are we? Then I suppose I'll call you Harry, then!" she attempted a smile, but it came out as a rather vicious smirk. Almost like a panther about to pounce on some poor lunchtime creature. It was definitely a bluff; she really couldn't cause me any harm.

"Well, it's more like I'm familiar with you, dear. You can call me one of five things," I replied holding up my closed fist. Her eyebrows shot up, and her hand went to her purse.

“Mr. Potter,” I said raising my index finger, “Sir, Mr. Potter, Potter, or King of the Badger Hutch. You get to choose.” I raised another finger with each name. She looked at me, astonished.

“You really are crazy, aren’t you?” Her fingers found her quill, but I was happy to note it was a normal self-inking one, not the Quick Quotes Quill she had used last year. I smiled happily.

“Of course I am,” but then added in a whisper, “Aren’t you happy I let you know first?” She nodded rapidly and a predatory grin rent her face.

“I am quite glad, Har—King of the Badger Hutch. But, you do realize that you said Mr. Potter twice, right?” I nodded my head. Her journal was in her hand and she was scribbling things down quickly.

“Yes quite.” She glanced up from her work, eyebrow raised. I said nothing.

“So, what do you have to say about that duel you were involved in with Mr. Avery?” Nothing like getting straight to the point, eh.

“Sorry?”

“Your fight,” she flicked her wand, “with Mr. Avery,” here she sneered. After I nodded her face returned to normal. Wasn’t much better but still, I’d rather her not look completely hideous all the time. Now that the duel was the subject, I sobered up. I looked into her eyes, making her flinch slightly.

“Now that the question of my sanity is out of the way, I hope you remember the deal we have.” She nodded, but flicked her quill impatiently.

“True, Mr. Potter, but this really happened. I’m just accurately describing the event as per one of the combatants,” she raised her eyebrow in challenge. I didn’t have time to waste with her. The Aurors would be here any moment, and then my sorry arse would be in jail, until they decided I deserved a trial. On the other hand, I may be arrested, but if Rita got hold of Avery he would spin the greatest tale

of how the Boy-Who-Lived snapped and attacked him. Letting out a slow breath, I took the lesser of the two malignancies. My hand reached out and turned the door knob, while the other grasped the front of Rita's robes and pulled her out along with me. Sometimes I think it would be best for me not to get up in the morning. Scratch that, it's actually most of the time.

Rita gave a sharp huff at being pulled roughly out of the inn, "What, are you doing, Potter?" I looked at her blankly.

"Giving you what you want. You want an honest interview; I'll give it to you. Fire away." She looked surprised that I would actually give her an interview, before setting her face and poising her quill over the parchment.

"How did the duel start?"

"I thought he was stealing my wand."

She quirked her eyebrows up, "He stole your wand?"

"No, no he didn't. Although it was a good thing I thought he did. I didn't realize it until a few moments afterwards, but he had his wand pressed against my back, that's why I thought he was robbing me."

"I see, so you two fought over nothing then?" A smile tore at her face. I shook my head while keeping pressure on my wound and leaned against the wall.

"No, I didn't know why he was fighting seriously, until I wounded him. My spell tore his sleeve." She said nothing, so I glanced at her sideways. The woman had an expectant look on her face.

"He had the Dark Mark," I said, "That was enough reason for him to attack me, I suppose."

"And why would that be?" I could tell she had believed me about Voldemort's return, but was just going along with the Ministry. People like her would never speak out against them.

“Not too hard to comprehend, really. If you don’t believe what I say about Voldemort retuning, there’s always the fact that I snuffed his boss the first time.” She flinched at his name, but replied anyhow.

“Ah, but Mr. Avery was acquitted of any wrong doing the first time.”

“I’m sure you’re old enough to know that. My point being, they toss Sirius Black in jail for murder without a trial, because he couldn’t pay off the judges. But they let people like Lucius Malfoy and Avery off because their gold fills the Ministry’s coffers,” I held up one hand to forestall her comments, “I have nothing but respect for Mr. Malfoy, a sneaky bastard he may be. The fact remaining, if you give them what they want, you get left alone. It’s like that with everything. Hence, why I’m even talking to you in the first place. Avery might have been innocent, might’ve not. Maybe he wanted to off me for another reason. I found a wand to my back, and an adult firing lethal curses at me, I defended myself, end of story.” She looked perplexed, before asking me one final question.

“Why were you in Diagon Alley in the first place? Legend has it that Dumbledore doesn’t let you out much over the summer.”

I chuckled a bit, “I thought legends were for dead people? No, I just stopped by to get some food and my school books.”

“School texts, already?”

“I’ve been busy. I figure if no one’s going to help me stave off Voldemort, I might as well start on my own,” let out a frustrated sigh and looked at her, “Only there’s so much to learn before I’m even capable to make breakfast with magic. I had never really thought about what it would’ve been like if I was raised by wizards, but now I’m starting to think it would have worked out much better than this shit. Mind you, I’m only telling you this because you’re the almost only decent conversation I’ve had all summer.”

“I’m the only decent conversation you’ve had? What about your guardians?” Her face had concern, pity, and ambition written all over it. I supposed that she couldn’t be rotten to the core. No one lives forty years without being a complete badass, or having some sense

of humanity about them. However I didn't want her pity or concern. Getting back to her question, I let out a quiet and surprisingly bitter laugh.

"I'd rather not go there, Rita. I'd really rather not," I closed my eyes for a moment. I had at one point, wanted the Dursley's attention, but I had grown out of that at a young age. A few years back, realizing I was a wizard, I had wanted nothing to do with them. But now that they were completely ignoring me I felt... I felt that maybe them belittling and harassing me was better, because at least then I existed. My eyes opened and I made a decision.

"Listen, if you publish my story, I'll give you interviews anytime you want. I'm, not to sound all ego-whatever or anything, bound to have more interesting and news-worthy things happen to me. This way you get a long term deal out of it." I offered her my hand as a way to seal the arrangement. I needed her story to be shown, I couldn't survive in Azkaban, but I could weather through a little more criticism. I knew that much. Nodding once she accepted it.

"Thanks," I said quietly and turned to leave. I glanced at her one more time as she reentered the pub, then continued on my way.

I returned to Little Whinging late. It was dark outside and a few small bats were fluttering about the streetlights. I'd put it at roughly eleven at night or so. I hadn't called the Knight Bus for a ride back, and I had only taken the muggle bus when I realized I wouldn't make it back by morning on foot. Walking was good for the soul; the bus had dropped me off in front of my current place of employ, The Convenience Store. Pardon the pun, but it was pretty convenient. I entered and asked my boss for some bandages and antiseptic after showing him my arm. Mr. Singh glared at me suspiciously before tending to the wound.

"I'm not your freaking nurse, kid. Where did you get these?" Mr. Singh rarely pried into my life, if I didn't answer it'd be fine by him, although one rarely refuses to answer.

"In a fight," I answered suppressing the urge to whimper as he cleaned the gash in my arm.

"You don't get burned in normal fights," He said looking at me strangely. I shrugged my free shoulder. He finished his task and sent me off to Number 4 with a Coke and a bag of crisps. Thank God for small favors, I was hungry and tired and sore. I had forgotten the books I had bought and my arm was sliced up. So far it had been pretty spectacular day. Note the sarcasm.

I arrived at Number Four Privet Drive in roughly fifteen minutes and proceeded to go around back. The Dursleys preferred I not enter through the front. Slipping my key into the lock I entered and noted the darkness that was in the kitchen. Flicking on a light, I read a note that was left on the counter.

Boy,

Gone for the weekend. Sandwich in the fridge. Don't touch our things.

Vernon.

I walked to the front and looked out the window. They had indeed left, the car was gone (surprisingly I hadn't noticed) and everything was shut, the windows, the armoire in which the television resided and the cupboard under the stairs. I swiftly opened the lock with key hidden on the bookshelf; they were a bunch of idiots really. I had known they hid the key there, but at least one of them was always in the room. I pulled out my trunk that was filled with the majority of my magical gadgets; the only things that were upstairs were a few homework texts, parchment, quills, ink, and Hedwig. Grabbing it, I tugged it roughly up the stairs and entered my room.

It was small, but it was clean. There was nothing better to do on my off days than clean and read. Outside wasn't a very welcoming place when Ickle Dudder's gang was about. I settled the trunk at the foot of the bed and opened the window, before letting my owl out for the night. She left quickly, in a flutter of white feathers and scent of unclean pigeon. Eh, maybe I should bathe her once in awhile. I'm not sure I was supposed to, but it was worth a shot. I left the window open and headed back downstairs. Food was calling, or so my tummy said.

Before I entered the kitchen I heard sounds. Sounds of the human variety, or more precisely someone eating. Drawing my wand quickly, I entered the kitchen and saw a robed figure in the fridge. I coughed loudly. The sounds stopped and a young, attractive witch peered over the door. However much I would like to see young, attractive witches in my fridge, there was just one problem. She was eating my dinner. She had her mouth around my Coke and my sandwich in one hand, which was bad for several reasons, most of which involved the different shades of pissed off I was in. Seeing my wand pointed steadily at her must've freaked her out a little, for she ducked behind the door again, before slipping away and setting down her—my food on the counter.

Then the strange witch turned slowly, before running over and attaching herself to me. I stood there stiffly.

“Oh, Harry you’re all right!”

“Yes, quite.”

“We’d thought you were hurt somewhere.” Oh, really. I felt like asking if she didn’t see how hard I beat his ass, but suppressed it. Instead I felt her chest.

“Your chest is firm, yet still supple.”

She squeaked and backed up a bit, “Hey paws off!”

“You grabbed me. I’ll ignore that, for now. Who are you and why are you eating my dinner?” Her cheeks reddened before she calmed herself enough to answer.

“Err, I’m Tonks. I’m your guard, I’m sorry for eating your dinner. I’ll make you something else?” Well, pink hair, Auror robes, and blue Ministry badge on her chest, either she was really one of Dumbledore’s ‘old crowd,’ which I doubt, or she was an Auror. The old guy couldn’t possibly afford her services. I lifted my wand and gestured to the door.

“Right, Tonks the guard, get out. I’ve already fought one idiot; I won’t hesitate to fight you as well.”

“I said I was sorry and Dumbledore said to come here,” she pouted and thrust her bottom lip out at me. I’ve seen worse things, and it was quite a bit more appealing than Voldemort’s lack of nose. Curse my teenage hormones. Deciding to hear her out, I folded my arms over my chest.

“It’s the principle of the thing. Now go make me a sandwich and explain yourself.” Male dominance at its best. She kept her pout up while making the food and setting it before me. At least the sandwich looked better than what my Aunt had made. As I was eating she noticed the bandages on my upper arm.

“You were hurt! Let me see.” Without waiting for a reply, she grabbed it and peeled back the bandages that were a little crusted with dried blood. It wasn’t as bad as I had originally thought. She let out a small gasp and an almost pained look of concentration came over her face as she attempted to heal it. It worked a bit, not as well as Madame Pomfrey, but the wound was closed and the flesh around it was tender.

“Thanks.”

“No problem,” she chirped, “Now finish up before I give you the news from Dumbledore.” Nodding, I wolfed down the sandwich, eager for news from the Headmaster. I might be getting out of here soon. It would put a damper on my muggle income, but Mr. Singh would understand. He always did. Er, either it was that or he didn’t particularly care.

“Ok, shoot.”

“Well, he said, ‘stay inside’.” I looked at her expecting more.

“That’s it.”

I sighed before smacking my head on the countertop, “Screw you guys, you can go away now.” She placed her head alongside mine.

“No, I can’t.”

I looked at her sideways, “ and why not?”

“Erm, well, your Aunt is gone and Dumbledore told me I have to keep watch until Sunday when the rest of the guard comes.” She reached into her robes and produced three letters, “I have to give you these, too.” I groaned and sat up. I had a pretty good feeling about what those were. Reaching over I plucked the letters out of her grasp and noted the first one had the Ministry’s crest on it. Oh, joy. I skimmed it.

Dear Mr. Potter,

We have received intelligence... A multitude of lacerating spells, shield charms, a summoning charm and one bludgeoning hex... Hearing on August 12... Ministry officials calling at your residence to destroy your wand...

Sincerely,

Mafalda Hopkirk

As expected, they were going to snap my wand. Folding the letter up carefully, I reached for the next one.

Dear Mr. Potter,

The Ministry, at the behest of one Albus Dumbledore, has decided to reconsider the destruction of your wand and retract your expulsion from Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry... August 12... An official descion will be made... suspended from school... Charges from one Mr. Thomas Avery...

Sincerely,

Mafalda Hopkirk

This was slightly better, but at least I had a chance now. Opening the final letter, I recognized Dumbledore’s handwriting.

Harry,

Stay inside. Do not surrender your wand, if worse comes to worse you may defend yourself, but only after escaping to Arabella Figg's house is no longer an option. There will be a guard stationed in your home to help protect against any repercussions your actions today have caused

- Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore.

I glanced back at Tonks who was going over the letters I had replaced with a sad look on her face.

"Mrs. Figg is a witch?" Tonks looked up startled.

"Oh, no she's a squib. She's been trying to keep an eye on you." She returned her gaze to letters.

"Well I'm gonna take a shower and head to sleep. Amuse yourself." I took my plate and glass over to the sink and washed them. Putting them to drain, I slouched upstairs and got ready for sleep. I tucked my wand under my pillow and locked my door.

Hopefully Tonks wouldn't get killed me by morning.

Chapter III: Sequence

Surprisingly, morning came and I was still alive, and as a bonus I was not in a holding cell somewhere within the Ministry's criminal interrogation center.

I grabbed my lenses off the nightstand and slipped them on. I had gotten new glasses recently; apparently I had been overdue for a checkup. The doctor had offered me the option of getting contact lenses but I refused. The comfortable weight on my face made me feel secure for some reason. The new ones were a bit sturdier and the prescription was a bit stronger so at least I could see better than I could before. I shrugged the sheets off and stood. The warm sunlight temporarily blinded me as I walked to the window. Hedwig had left a letter on the sill. I picked it up and moved over to my wardrobe. Clothes weren't so much of a hassle anymore as I had gotten some new ones, and my old battered wardrobe barely held them all. Mr. Singh rather I didn't show up to work dressed up as a homeless man.

After I had gathered my clothes and a towel, I opened the door and stepped into the hall. There, slumped down against the wall, red eyed and drowsy, was Tonks. Scratching my head, I nudged her with my foot. Blindingly fast, she sat up and had her wand out in moments. Then, realizing there was no danger; she tilted her head back and stared at me.

"I take it you've been here all night." She nodded weakly and shut her eyes for a moment.

"Well I'm awake, you can sleep now."

She shook her head and stood up shakily, "C-c-can't I'm your guard."

She let out a long yawn and leaned against the doorframe. Muttering various obscenities that I had picked up from my Uncle under my breath, I dropped my clothes on the floor. I really couldn't stand to see people suffer for me. Even if it was only sleep deprivation, well that and the fact that it gave me an excuse to feel up her well-developed, girly body. I slipped an arm around her and got her into

my room. She protested weakly, saying how she was entrusted to keep me safe and that I could get attacked if she slept.

“Listen Tonks, You need sleep. You can’t protect anyone if you’re tired.” I lifted her slightly (she was a bit heavier than I’d imagined) and put her on my bed. It groaned slightly at its temporary inhabitant. She mumbled something incoherently and dropped her head on my pillow. Grinning lecherously, I attempted to get her undressed, but she slapped my hands away.

“Even I’m n-no-not that tired, punk,” she mumbled with a yawn. Shrugging, I tucked her under the sheets and left her to her nap. At least I had tried.

After my shower I went down to the kitchen and cooked myself an omelet. I didn’t really enjoy eggs much, but they were breakfast food and had some sort of protein thing working for them. I downed it hungrily and scavenged my plate for more. I hadn’t realized how hungry I was; maybe a sandwich wasn’t the most filling dinner after a day of traipsing London’s streets and fighting with mass murdering henchmen. I hurriedly grabbed more eggs and such out of the fridge and made another omelet.

When my stomach was full I set about finding some paper and crayons. I was going to write a letter. I scrounged up a yellow, green, and broken blue crayon out of one of the drawers in the kitchen and grabbed a sheet of blank paper from a pile near Dudley’s computer and got to work.

Deer Tonks,

I’m going 2 werk. Bee back Leighter. Git sum food from the fridge. Do not DESTROY anything. Please.

Luv,

King of the Badger Hutch. (Also sometimes known as Harry Potter)

I wrote all this in varying combinations of the crayons I had, and added green and blue renditions of Godzilla near the word DESTROY.

It looked xtreemly, ahem, extremely gaudy and childish. Perfect, I felt almost like an artist now. I glanced at the letter and was horrified to note that there was no red involved. Maybe I wasn't much of an artist for thinking this, but I felt it needed some red. Coming to a viable conclusion I opened the fridge and pulled out a bottle of ketchup. Smiling happily I coated my hand in it and left a huge handprint on the letter. I washed the excess off and placed the bottle back in the fridge. Feeling content with my work I went about straightening up the kitchen.

Apparently Tonks didn't clean up after herself well, because I found shards of plate on the ground and broken glass in the sink. You know, I'd usually be pissed off by now, seeing as I had to clean it, but remembering her tired face I just went about the business quietly. No one had ever stayed up all night to keep guard on me before. At least not to my knowledge, maybe my parents had, but I had no way of knowing. Sirius didn't like to talk about them much in his letters; I suppose it hurt too much to think about what he had once had. Although he what he did write made me feel as though I really had a father or an uncle. As though maybe someday, when Voldemort got bored with me, that I'd be able to live like a normal person. I could get a job, have a family, maybe some kids. Sirius would be the dirty old man always ogling at my son's girlfriends and I'd be there to keep him company when he needed it.

A quiet, normal family life.

I knew it was nigh impossible, but I could dream too, couldn't I?

The morning was hot, strangely so. It wasn't past eleven yet, and I could see the haze rise up off the asphalt. The neighborhood wasn't yet alive. There were no children outside (they would be happy for a break from Dudley) and no adults about yet. I could hear various air conditioners working as I left the house. It was a lazy Saturday morning. Tugging on a cap to block the sun, I shut the door and locked it.

Six hours of work and I'd be back to just laze about the rest of the day, that is, if Tonks didn't kill herself trying to find me. Someone would

have to bury the body. I shrugged and continued on, following the pavement listlessly. Soon the clean solid sidewalks of Privet Drive gave way to older cracked ones of Wisteria with roots and grasses pushing through the concrete. I lifted my head and stared at the old ash tree I knew would be patiently waiting ahead of me. I didn't know what it was waiting for; I just felt that it waited. As I passed it I ran my hands across the bark in the usual ritual. There were scars along its surface and roughed out patches and bullet holes punched through at odd intervals. It had weathered through all of them and was still here. I felt myself smile slightly. This tree had been my inspiration. When the letters stopped coming, when the Prophet started the slander, when everything seemed too big and important for me to handle, the tree had been there to remind me that everyone went through the same thing. Some showed their scars on the outside, others on the inside. Many people couldn't stand it, but more weathered through the pain. The tree had given me a reason. I wanted to live; I wanted to see the world 50, 60 years down the road. No, damned 'Dark Lord' was going to off me before that. I clenched my fist tightly and resumed my walk. Damned stupid thing to rely on a tree, though.

Soon I left Wisteria and passed a couple of more well kept neighborhoods before reaching the more commercial area of Little Whinging. There were a few small restaurants and fast food places, and also the convenience store I worked at and a Laundromat. This part of town gave the mostly quiet suburb a busy feel. Which was precisely why I liked it, I couldn't stand to be bored for very long. I threw my apron on and entered the store with a mild "jingle" from the bell. Mr. Singh, who had been napping again moved his paper enough to see me and jabbed a thumb towards the back. That meant there were things to be unloaded.

I nodded at him and went to the door behind the counter, punching my card along the way. It didn't really matter if I punched in or not, though, Mr. Singh always kept the time in his head. Sometimes he'd give me a little extra pay, which I didn't like, but I realized that was his way of looking out for me. I opened the door and stepped through into the garage/storage area. The truck was parked and the rear door was ajar, meaning there was nothing that could melt inside. The truck was refrigerated so that things like ice cream and milk wouldn't go bad. I

pulled the door open the rest of the way to see large stack of bags. There was cat food inside of the vehicle.

“What the hell?” I grabbed one, it easily weighed 20 pounds, and hauled it back inside. Moving myself over to empty space near the back, where I assumed it was to go, I set it down gently. I stalked back to the counter and glared at my boss. He lowered his paper and glared right back.

“What?”

“What, what do you mean, what! Is there a reason we’re stocking cat food?” He nodded and grumbled to himself before saying,

“Yeah. A bunch of people have been asking about cat food recently, so I decided to stock some.”

“Oh.”

“Is there still a problem, Potter?” His eyes were focused on me. I flattened my hair nervously.

“Uh, are we getting dog food, too?” His eyes narrowed before he reclined again and placed his paper over his face, “We haven’t got much call for that around here. Back to work.” I grimaced and went back to unloading cat food. I didn’t like cats too much. Crookshanks was fine, he was smart and knew when I was in a bad mood, but the rest of his kind just wanted to be petted and fed. I’d be better off with a fern. I continued to stack the cat food for the better part of an hour. When I had finished I was to take inventory on the ice cream as per Mr. Singh’s gestures. Soon lunchtime rolled around and a group of normal muggle teenagers entered the store. They bought their food and chatted amiably, while I looked on, wistful.

A rather large part of me wanted to join them, laughing and talking about good times. That same larger part also knew that it was only wishful thinking. I was never part of this world. I was meant to be raised like a wizard. Bitter laughter resounded in my head. Even my own ‘people’ hated me. For the most part they were all fair-weather friends. Even the two people that I had counted as close to family

abandoned me. After a few weeks their letters had gotten shorter, and soon they sent jointed letters, which almost as quickly gave way to no letters at all. Ron, I still hadn't completely forgiven from the year before and if they were staying together I would have expected him to lord it over me. Hermione on the other hand, she was my best friend. I had been with her through everything, and only she hadn't abandoned me during that idiotic tournament. She was like an older sister to me. It hurt that she had stopped her letters, too.

Lunchtime passed slowly, and afterwards I mournfully watched the sun move through the sky from behind the store's windows. I occupied my time with sweeping, while Mr. Singh handled the customers. My mind wasn't on my work, as usual. It was hard not to think of all the things that would soon happen. For all I knew I could be in Azkaban in a less than a month's time. I would be wandless, defenseless and hated far and wide. If you can't tell, I'm a very optimistic person. The bell chimed up front and I assumed another customer had entered. I was very wrong. Not five seconds later I felt a sweaty palm cover my mouth and drag me towards the back. I panicked and jabbed my elbow into my captor's gut. Whoever it was gave a girlish yelp and I saw a flash of green before we both fell.

"I told you no fooling around in here, Potter. Who's your friend?" Mr. Singh had appeared as we were both sprawled on the floor. I sat up and glanced back. Tonks was on the ground rubbing the spot where I had elbowed her. Then I turned my attention back to Mr. Singh.

"Right, boss this is Tonks. Tonks this is my boss, Mr. Singh. I have no idea why she's here." It was always best to be straight with Mr. Singh. He had some sort of lie detector built in. He nodded accepting my explanation, as we both got up. Tonks jabbed me in the ribs and pulled me towards the back wall.

"Harry, do you know how long I had to look for you? No? Well I've been looking high and low for three hours. The guard is coming in less than ten minutes!" I scratched an itch on my elbow before answering.

"I thought that was tomorrow or something." Her mouth dropped open and she pulled out the letter I had received this morning.

“Didn’t you read this?” Wow, was she stupid or something? If I did would she have found it unopened? I shook my head.

“Moody sent it. It says that the guard rescheduled to pick you up! I’m going to get in trouble again!” Then she added in a whisper that I suppose I wasn’t supposed to hear, “I can’t do anything right.” Guilt hit me. It was my fault I had forgotten cleanly about the letter in my haste to do something utterly stupid. I put a hand on her shoulder and pulled over to the front where Mr. Singh had been watching us.

“Erm, Boss?”

“Yeah?”

“I’ve gotta go now. Like for the rest of the summer,” I said hurriedly. He looked from me to Tonks and then back again. He opened the register and pulled out my pay for the week. I placed the cash in my wallet and slipped it back in my pocket, before extending my hand. He grinned, genuinely and shook it.

“You be here next summer, Potter.” With that said we left.

Chapter IV: Exodus

We quickly left the shop. The sun was going down and the stores were flicking on their signs and lights. Tonks' face was pink and she looked tired. I figure she hadn't slept very well or very long. This got me thinking. Maybe it was my bed that didn't let me sleep as well as the Hogwarts beds. I woke up at all times of the night unless I was really tired. Come to think of it I hadn't slept as well as I did last night in almost a month. Moving swiftly, we made it to Crescent and then to Wisteria. I rubbed my palms across the ash tree briefly before jogging to catch up with Tonks. There was no time, and I didn't want her to get punished because of my error.

We got to Number 4, tripped through the door and sprinted upstairs just as I heard the telltale pop of apparition. I hope to whatever God deems it fit to listen to me that it wasn't Moody that first arrived. The fake one had been a case by himself, the real thing could only be worse. We rushed about tossing things into my trunk, clothes, books, ink, a torchlight, some food and the pillowcase I had stuffed under the floorboard. Tonks was in the midst fitting Hedwig's cage into it when the door sprung open and in came the guard.

At the head were my former Defense professors, Remus Lupin and Alastor Moody. Following them was the most ill fit group I had ever set my eyes on. The group consisted of three old men, a tall black fellow, one Caucasian male with blonde hair, and an attractive young witch. With all of them in here my small room seemed even smaller. Upon seeing me they all burst out with various remarks while Remus rushed up and gathered me in an awkward hug. Holding me at arm's length he nodded approvingly.

"Good, good," he muttered, "You're not hurt are you?" I opened my mouth to say no, but he waved his hand in some sort of motion and the dark haired young witch scrambled over with her wand out.

"Check him, please, Hestia." She nodded, chirped out some Latin phrase and her wand started to emanate a soft blue glow. Lupin looked me again.

“Well Harry, how has your summer been?” He looked battered and tired. His robes were in much worse condition than before, and he was bleeding from the thigh. His robe hid most of it but I could smell the odor coming off of him. He also refused to lean his weight on that side, so it had to be fairly deep then. I decided not to coddle him with false happiness.

“Absolute shit.” His jaw dropped, while the others were in various states of amusement or shock. The woman, who I assumed was Hestia, gave a rather immature snort out of one nostril and dropped her wand. Blushing slightly, she bent down to pick it up and I couldn’t help but stare at her backside. You can’t blame me. I’m a fourteen year old hormonal boy. An almost obscenely loud laugh tore me from my, umm, observations. The real Mad-Eye Moody clapped a weathered hand on my shoulder.

“Nothing like the straight truth is there, Potter?” Confused, I agreed.

“WRONG!” Moody clapped me a good one over the head.

“NEVER give a potential enemy the whole truth, understand. Sirius said you had potential. He said you wanted to be an Auror, at this rate you’d NEVER make it.” I perked up at Sirius’ name. My Godfather was bragging about me. It gave me a warm sort of feeling in my chest, stopping just short of heart burn. Then again, Moody was yelling as though he was my teacher or something. Crouch had earned my respect, no matter if he’d tried to kill me or not. I had learned more in that one year than I had in the three previous ones. This Moody acted as though he already had it.

“Terribly sorry, ex-Auror Moody, but if they let her in,” I hooked a thumb at Tonks, who was standing by innocently, “They’d beg to let me in, providing I don’t follow my mind and join the circus. I’ve heard, from a reliable source, that the pay is decent and the women are better.” A sharp pain exploded in my thigh and I looked down to see Hestia’s annoyed face and her wand pressed against my leg.

“Whoops.” She snarled darkly. I shrugged.

"I'm entitled to it. I'm fourteen years old, and I don't know the value of a good woman, yet." The men coughed trying to hold in their amusement.

"Harry, speaking from experience, don't go there while a woman has her wand near your bits," rumbled the tall man in the corner, he looked sorta oppressed by the small space, "Oh, by the by, I'm Kingsley, Tonks' squad leader." I nodded at him and took a hesitant glance sideways where Hestia was now redoing Tonks' job on my arm with a glare firmly fixed on her face. She still looked cute though.

"Erm, heh, sorry if I offended you." Someday my changing emotions towards women were going to get me cursed into thirty different pieces. I turned my attention to Lupin.

"So, Professor, where are we going?" He looked at Moody, who did nothing in response. Probably angry that I'd snubbed him.

"Headquarters," he answered plainly. Ah, it was classified information. Moody probably had the clearance to talk about it. I would have asked whose headquarters it was, but I knew they wouldn't answer. Besides, it was obviously Dumbledore's.

"Well, how are we getting there?"

This time Kingsley answered.

"Once Hestia is finished, we fly." He moved over to Tonks who was holding Hedwig's cage in her limp grasp.

"Do you mind if I let her out? We can't fly with her in tow; she'll have to follow us." I nodded mutely; this Kingsley fellow wasn't half bad. I watched as he opened her cage and motioned her towards the window.

"Done," Hestia announced from my other side. My burn wasn't bothering me anymore. She was about to release her concentration on the spell, when I grabbed her wrist.

“Not done,” I said. She quirked an eyebrow up at me. I pointed to Remus, “He’s bleeding.”

Remus held his hands up stuttering and muttering about how it wasn’t large, and not to bother with it.

“Sit” Hestia barked. Jesus, are all Healers this bossy? He pulled out my rickety chair from the desk near the window and sat down heavily. Sighing, he pulled aside his robes to let Hestia see the wound. It looked like something with claws had gouged at him. The wound wasn’t bleeding badly, but his patched and frayed pant leg was dark with the blood. The Healer tutted once, something that reminded me heavily of Madame Pomfrey, and got to work. As Hestia was healing, Tonks tugged on my sleeve.

“Come on, finish packing.” I gave her a brief nod and pulled my broom out. She shut the trunk.

“Let’s get going.” I grabbed my Firebolt, while she levitated my trunk and the remaining guard marched us downstairs. Hestia was still healing Lupin. Once we had reached the bottom Moody called for the guard to get their brooms and get me safely outdoors. Unsurprisingly there were various brooms on the kitchen floor. While they were getting settled, Remus and Hestia came down the stairs and Mad-Eye reissued his orders. Hestia moved over by Tonks as she picked up her broom from the floor. Remus approached me with a questioning look in his face.

“How did you know I was hurt?” How could I not.

“You had a slight limp, didn’t want to put pressure on that leg, and I could smell the blood faintly, anything else?”

He grinned, “Ah, more and more like your mother every time I see you.” This time I gave him what I hoped was a questioning glance.

“Are you calling me a girl?”

He laughed, “No, not at all. It’s just you look like your father, but your personality is all hers.”

"I'd like to think my personality is the result of my actions and my environment."

"Lily said that one time."

"Touché, Moony, Touché." He placed a hand on my shoulder before turning to face the door. There was a time when the mere mention of my parents could set me off. A period when the names, Lily and James, hurt almost as much as if you had slapped me. Seeing their shades at the graveyard last year had cleared me of those feelings. I no longer thought that they hated me for bringing Voldemort down upon them. I knew that they died defending their world as much as they had died defending me.

AN: Edit: Chapter was cut.

Chapter V: Fault

The flight went off without a hitch. I returned my attention to the matter at hand. The sky was fairly cloudy and kept us hidden from the view of any Muggles that happened to be observing the night sky. Tonks offered to race me multiple times, I declined. The thrill of being in the air again was enough to make me happy. I had forgotten how much I missed flying. We circled high above central London for a few miles and then veered off unceremoniously in the direction of one the neighborhoods not too far from Kings Cross Station. Moody barked out a sharp order and we all dove into a secluded park.

It was dark by this point, not the usual, calm, nighttime dark, but a quieter deathly dark. It was as if all light had been removed out of the park. We clambered off our brooms and shouldered them in eerie synchronization. Mad-Eye growled something quietly and the guards at each of the corners lit their wands quietly. We made our way carefully to the (from my perspective) northern exit, with Remus at the head. The park itself smelled of rot and dead plants. I could hear the creak of the rusty swing set as we passed it, the smallish children's slide looked like a deathtrap and I heard what I thought was a snake hiss somewhere in the bushes. In its entirety, the place made me feel as though I was about to be cruelly murdered. As we approached a wrought iron gate each of the guards snuffed their lights, until only Remus' was left aglow. He fumbled with a key and a few clinks later the gate swung open of its own accord, Lupin's hand was still outstretched, as if to actually turn the key.

"That's not creepy at all," I muttered and walked forward. I really should have expected things like this by now. I heard a quiet laugh from my right.

"You can face down Dark Lords, but can't handle a gate opening on its own," Hestia whispered amusedly to me as we walked towards it. That irritated me, what am I supposed to be, the freakin' fearless Badger Lad, saving the world daily without a care for my own damn safety? I think not, ideally my safety comes first whenever a population bigger than 50 people isn't being threatened. I squinted at her in the low light.

"It's like this," I whispered, walking slowly. She slowed her pace to match mine, "You don't see creepy Dark Lords in those muggle movies, but you do see gates and doors' opening on their own, right before someone gets..." I whispered and then added, at her expectant look, "EATEN!"

She jumped literally a foot off the ground and fell on her bum. I couldn't hold it in, I laughed. After a few moments I looked down at her.

If looks could kill, I'd be somewhere off the coast of Normandie with cinderblocks tied to my limbs and shark bait dangling from my crotch, she was pissed. Hoping to appease her, I stretched out my hand to help her up, while the rest of the guard looked on, unamused. Stomping over loudly, Moody snarled at me.

"Boy, you could have alerted the entire countryside to our position!" I looked back at him, nonplussed.

"If I didn't, you just did." I felt Hestia's hand slip into my own and I pulled her back up. Rolling my shoulder and smiling winningly, I started off to the right, before realizing something.

"Where am I going?"

Suddenly, I felt Hestia's hand again. Only this time it was clamped over my mouth, muffling my squawks of protest, while two of the older men dragged me in the opposite direction. My broom slipped from my grasp and clattered to the ground. It felt like I was being kidnapped by a nurse and two old homeless guys. Oh, the shame.

I looked about, turning my head wildly, but her hand would not move. Damn her dexterity, damn it to hell. I glimpsed Mad-Eye with some sort of silver clicker extinguishing all the lights in the square. The men suddenly let go of me, but the Healer's hand was still firmly keeping me quiet. Then, I felt a pair of warm lips near my left ear. I shivered and knew that she distinctly enjoyed my reaction.

"Make a sound and we're all screwed, Potter. Now move."

I moved. One does not trifle with a hot, angry girl near one's ear. I'm ashamed to admit it even in my own mind, but I had never been in this close proximity to an attractive woman before. We came to a rest in front of a row of dark, run down houses. Lupin slipped a scrap of paper into my hand and told me to, 'read, memorize, and commit to memory.' I unfolded it and mumbled 'I need a light,' into Hestia's hand. Her lips appeared at my ear once again.

"What was that?" I felt her bottom lip brush against my earlobe, and several feelings rushed through me. Strongest among them were arousal and attraction, but irritation and anger were there, too. Her hand moved slightly and I was free to request a light. The note read, in the Headmaster's loopy script,

The Headquarters of the Order of the Phoenix may be found at Number 12 Grimmauld Place.

I had scarcely finished reading it when it was snatched away and set alight by Hestia's wand. I removed my attention from the burning note and looked for the house. I suppose it was under the Fidelius charm.

"Where the f..." I didn't get to finish my query as Hestia smacked one of her hands over my mouth before using the other to twist my ear between two of her fingers. Bloody hell, that hurts. Well, I really wasn't going to put up with this for any longer. I had played along, going with the whole self-absorbed, annoying teenager routine, but this? This was a one way road to a very angry Harry Potter. No one twisted my ears without a written and signed release form.

She wasn't really trying to hold me back so slipping out of her grip wasn't a problem. I pulled away and grabbed her. A flash of something coursed through my head, but I wasn't paying any attention. My hand was around Hestia's throat as I slammed her into a cold stone wall that hadn't been there a few seconds prior.

"Don't play games with me," I growled out, it sounded a bit more guttural than I had expected. She couldn't answer, I was squeezing too hard. My eyes widened and I let go. The Healer slumped to the ground, her eyes wild with fear. My mouth grew dry. Voldemort. I looked down, my hand was shaking. Not from fear, but excitement.

The flash I had experienced was Voldemort torturing someone. He had felt exhilaration at causing someone pain, and channeled the excess towards me. I quickly put my hand in my pocket and clenched my thigh. Not now. Anytime, but now.

“S-So-Sorry,” Hestia squeaked out. I didn’t look at her, I couldn’t. It scared me to be completely honest. I would never know how intense the flashes would be. I released my hold on my thigh and pulled my hand awkwardly out of my pocket. My eyes shifted to the high cold grey wall I had held her against. It hadn’t been there before. My gaze traced all over it before settling on the number hanging on the black iron gate.

Twelve.

My hand reached out and turned the knob. The gate swung open with barely a sound and I stepped through, noting how the wall dissolved as I did. Surprised, I turned around. The guard was standing behind me and had not yet stepped through the gate. Only they didn’t look normal. It looked as if all the color had been removed from them and their surroundings. They were all grey. Moody’s face warred between scared and wary, Kingsley looked a little shaken and the rest of them all had varying stages of fright in their features, all except Tonks. She stepped in after me and handed me my Firebolt with a smile. I accepted it and she patted my head.

“You showed her,” she said, “Hestia had been doubting the fact that you were really able to face You-Know-Who. Although, that was a bit scary.” She looped her arm through mine and pulled me forward.

“Yeah, about that... I really don’t know what came over me. I just wanted her to stop messing with me.” My solemn face caused her smile to falter a bit, before it regained its shine. She pinched my cheek.

“Ooooh, does little Harry have a crush on Hestia?” Growling at her, I batted her hand away and grabbed my trunk. She had been pulling it alongside her.

"No, Harry doesn't," I said moving ahead of her. The garden that was outside the house was dead, even the weeds were dying. The dirt was a sallow grayish brown and the birdbath was cracked and covered with dead moss. Gargoyles, unsurprisingly, were perched on the porch and seemed to glare at me as I pulled my things up the stairs. I think they were trying a bit hard for the 'Evil Villain' theme. Then again it was perfect camouflage. I smirked; I should paint the courtyard yellow. I raised my fist to knock on the door when Tonks yelled not to.

"Why not?" She grabbed my still extended arm and slipped a key into the keyhole.

"Because," she hissed, "You really don't want to know what happens if you do." I motioned for her to walk ahead of me and after she did, I did, pulling my stuff inside behind me. Tonks' wand was lit and she was pointing to various things in the entrance hall. The house was dark; dark wood, dark walls, dark grimy gas lamps, the place even had me thinking dark thoughts.

"Those are house elves, if you couldn't tell, it's a tradition to behead them and put them up on the wall before they die," she whispered. I heard the rest of the guard standing behind me; their breathing was the only sound to be heard, other than Tonks' tour guide impression of course. I looked up at the elves. Some of their faces were stretched in terror, others in joy, and a few more somewhere between constipation and hostility. Creepy. We moved on and came to a large ornate end table that was squeezed tightly into an alcove. My tour guide nearly knocked the vases that were on it over with a careless flick of her wand. I reached my hand out to set them properly.

"These are antique urns, some of them are filled with the ashes of dead relatives of mine," she continued. I paused and yanked my hand back, her relatives? This was her house then, I wouldn't have expected that. She was far too cheery to live in a gloomy place like this, or maybe that was why she was so happy. Brushing these thoughts aside I forged on, pulling my trunk along behind me. It scraped the ground as I walked, but I tried to make sure it didn't leave marks on the floor. No one can say I'm inconsiderate. Soon, the hall

widened until we came to a fork, a three pronged fork. Err, a trident, yes, a trident. A trident in the road. Maybe I could copyright that.

"Here's where the road splits," she announced a bit quieter than before. She hazarded a careful step forward making for the door, then turned, "Follow me." She took another step forward and tripped over a large troll's leg in her path. I could have sworn though, it definitely hadn't been there before. I dropped my broom for the third time that night.

"Tonks!" I called as I reached over and grabbed the back of her shirt. My fingers closed around the green fabric and managed to get her upright. However that didn't apply to the leg, for it fell, with a fleshy thump and spilled umbrellas everywhere. A few seconds passed with entirely no sound, I had even stopped breathing. Then a piercing wail tore the air. A curtain that had been draped over the wall near the stairs flew open, and there for all to see, was a woman. I presumed that she had been pretty at some point, but the years hadn't been kind to her. She had long black hair and vicious grey-blue eyes. Her mouth was twisted in a snarl, her arms were long and slender and her nails were wickedly sharp. She grasped the edges of her portrait and shook.

"FILTH, BLOOD TRAITORS, MUDBLOODS, DEFILING THE HOUSE OF MY FATHERS!" Tonks grimaced and I let go of her shirt. The woman paused and stared at me for a few moments before continuing.

"OH, THEY'VE BROUGHT ANOTHER ONE TO ADD TO THE RANKS, ACCOMPANIED MY THE SHAME OF OUR HOUSE, NO LESS. OUT! LEAVE HERE!" Tonks looked at me apologetically before speaking.

"Harry, I'd like you to meet my Great Aunt Walburga." I gaped. The banshee that had been painted on that unsightly yellow canvas was Tonks' Aunt? They looked nothing alike. After I regained control of my mouth I could only say one thing.

"Can't see the resemblance." She grinned at me.

SCUM, CREATURES, WEREWOLVES HAVE INFESTED MY HOME, OH WHERE DID I GO WRONG!" She was obviously referencing Remus' presence. However, he didn't look too bothered. He offered me my broom before stepping around Tonks and opening the door that was ahead of us. In a flash, someone darted out, wand drawn.

"SHUT UP, woman!" There, climbing the stairs was none other than ex-convict/accused mass murderer, Sirius Black. Also known in some parts as my Godfather. He brandished his wand, which let off multicolored sparks.

"THREATEN YOUR OWN MOTHER, WILL YOU!" the portrait shrieked, "I SHOULD HAVE DROWNED YOU WHEN YOU WERE BORN!" Ooh, ouch. He clapped a hand to his forehead before jabbing his wand and uttering, "Silencio." Then he drew the curtains before facing us, sheepishly. The portrait rattled behind him.

"Eh, Heh heh heh, well Harry I see you've met dear old Mum," he greeted. I nodded and smirked.

"Too right I have. My word, how ever did your father hold back on his wedding night! Quite a catch isn't she?" He looked at me darkly.

"He didn't hold back, I was born exactly nine months after the wedding," he mumbled. I chuckled at the dejected look on his face. Trust him to completely change my mood in less than a minute.

"How's your summer been?" He let out an unhappy breath and sat on the stairs.

"Absolute shit."

I nodded, "Same here."

He stood and offered me his hand. I crossed the floor and shook it before being pulled into a manly hug. He did the same thing as Remus, stepping back and giving me an appraising look.

"Well, you've grown. Filled out a bit," here he poked at my chest, "You gotten laid yet?" My cheeks colored, and I shook my head.

“No matter, that’s your new goal this year! Surprise, here’s a gift.” He drew a thick manila envelope out of his robes, handed it to me, and winked. Walburga’s portrait shook again. He drove his elbow into it calmly, his smile still plastered onto his face. I knew that smile; this was some half-baked scheme of his. It was the same crazed smile he used while trying to kill Pettigrew two years ago. I was looking forward to it, however. We walked down the stairs all smiles. Tonks made to grab at the envelope.

“Paws off,” I said, copying her phrase from the night before. She pouted at me.

“No one ever gets me surprise presents.” Moody clunked over and directed them all into the door ahead, which I supposed was the kitchen if the smells coming from it were any indication. I made to follow Tonks, but Mad-Eye’s arm blocked my path.

“Not you, Laddie. Upstairs with the other kids,” he pointed towards Mrs. Black’s portrait. He entered, leaving only Sirius and Remus outside. Remus shrugged apologetically and went in.

“Harry,” Sirius said, seriously, “Find an empty room and open that folder. You’ve got maybe ten minutes. Go.”

“SIRIUS!” He flinched at the sound, and shooed me down the hall next to the door.

“What are you doing out there?” He winced at the sharpness of the tone.

“Talking to Harry... shit. RUN!”

“Harry!” Mrs. Weasley yelled. I heard something drop in the kitchen while Sirius attempted to block the door. Then I heard it, a sound so terrible few men have kept their composure afterwards. Molly Weasley was bustling. I heard her bustling. Seems things always end this way. I nodded at Sirius and took off down the hall at a dead sprint, tugging my accoutrements along behind me.

Chapter VI: Nightfall

My feet hit the hardwood floors as I pelted down the hall at a ridiculous pace. My trunk followed behind happily, clunking and leaving light but evident gashes in the floor's finish. I glanced back at a particularly deep mark and slowed. Sirius' mother would pitch a fit if she'd realized I had screwed up her surprisingly well preserved flooring. I pinned her for that kind of uptight bitch, kind of like Aunt Petunia. Strange how that is, no? Considering both of our childhoods had been utter hell. I'd venture to guess that the flooring was the most attractive thing about the house, other than Mrs. Black's exquisite portrait, of course. I stopped completely and let out a chuckle, or maybe it was a giggle, or rather something betwixt the two. It was really hard to imagine the idea of someone praising the Black matriarch's beauty or lack thereof. Another half-chuckle passed my lips before I caught on to the reason I had been tearing up the floor in the first place.

Mrs. Weasley.

The Mrs. Weasley of whom I had no right idea why I was running away from. Sirius had advised me to run from her, but I really didn't harbor any animosity towards the mother as much as I did the offspring. Ron's smiling face popped into my head, smiling as he left letters unwritten. Of course Hermione soon followed, a mental image of her tossing unfinished letters onto a pile of even more unfinished accounts dashed across my field of vision. My hand gripped the handle of my luggage tightly.

"Tch, some friends," I muttered. I looked about for something to kick, it usually helped. Unfortunately there was nothing kickable in sight. A trickle of something wet drew my attention to my palm; my fingernails had dug into my flesh and drawn blood. I winced slightly at the pain. They'd better have excellent excuses. A flare of anger flashed through my mind leaving me near breathless.

Voldemort again, god damn.

I lost hold of the trunk, pressed my palm against my thigh and leaned against the right wall, pondering as I recovered. This flash had been

the strongest I'd felt in a while, the strongest since last summer to be precise. The remembrance of that year only made me feel worse; as last year the Dark Lord had nearly killed me. My throat closed as my thoughts veered off to the place where I'd sworn they'd never tread again, the Tri-Wizard Tournament.

Voldemort had succeeded in killing one of my fellows, then. Cedric Diggory, a person whom I had considered a friend and comrade. It could have very easily been me, and truthfully it frightened me because I had seen myself becoming like Cedric, someday. I had considered him somewhat a rival, but even more he had been Hogwarts' champion and he hadn't held it against me that I'd somehow ended up in the tournament. He had been a good man. The rage surged again, causing me to thump my fist against the wall in order to divert some of it. My eyesight went blurry and I pounded the wall once more, this time I wasn't sure if it was from Voldemort's anger or my own.

The wall creaked as some dust from above fell on my head. I shook it wildly and stared up. From the point above the grimy gas lamps, that were nearly level with my head, the walls were, in short, scummy. Cobwebs and dust clung to the upper portions of the wall that climbed high and disappeared in the shadows of the ceiling. Apparently whoever was given custodial duty around here wasn't very astute. I dropped my gaze back down to my luggage and spied the envelope that my godfather had handed me. I dragged an arm across my face and moved away from the wall.

"Wonder what it is..." I leant forward to pick it up, but thought better of it. It'd be more practical to open it in a spare room or something. I grasped the trunk once more and pulled it ways before stopping again. Casting another glance over my shoulder I noted that the lamps I had passed had been extinguished. In fact only the ones in roughly 6 feet were alight. It would actually be just as safe to open the parcel here. The hall was as dark as pitch on both sides of me, I would know if someone was approaching.

"Of course, my curiosity could be driving into danger, again," I drawled to myself as I set my accoutrements against the wall. I gathered up the envelope and sank down onto the top of the trunk,

weary. I hadn't really noticed how tired I was. My head rested against the wall and I slid a finger under the flap to open Sirius' 'present.' I heard a light clinking as a set of phials slipped out. They were made of glass or at least seemed to be made of glass judging by the properties of the clink. A wry smile split my face until I read the scrap of parchment that was wedged into the leather that was keeping them together. My eyes nearly fell out of my head. He was actually serious about the whole 'goal for this year thing!'

Harry,

These are contraceptives. For males. Don't throw them out! Ok?

-Sirius

"Something is wrong with him," I choked out as I stared at a poorly drawn rendition of sperm with X's for eyes. It was apparent that he'd tried to explain what exactly the liquid in vials did with pictures instead of words. I put the set of phials near the end of the trunk so that I could not be held accountable if they fell and just happened to break. It would save me the embarrassment of having them unused for the rest of my life. I picked up the envelope again, there was something more inside it. I slipped my hand in and yanked it out. It was a small wooden hand mirror. Wrapped around it was another piece of parchment, which hopefully didn't involve Sirius' horrendous cartoons. I opened it up. The writing looked hasty, and some words were a bit difficult to make out.

Harry

I was just informed that you wouldn't be allowed into the meeting tonight, which I believe is a gross injustice seeing that tonight's gossip circle is all about you. Yes, I know, sounds interesting, right? Well that's what the mirror is for. It used to belong to your Dad. I have the matching one. We had enchanted these so that we could talk to one another when we were in separate detentions. It didn't happen too often, but we were bored out of minds when it did. The point is, my mirror is propped up above the china cabinet in the kitchen. That means you can eaves—listen in, unseen. Just say my name near the mirror, it should work.

-Sirius

I set the note down and stared at the small mirror curiously, I suppose this made up for the contraceptives. I turned my head and stared down the hall, it was clear, no one would be coming. I turned my head the other way, and confirmed that no one would happen upon me from the other direction. My gaze dropped once more to the mirror.

“Gasp! ‘Tis a portal!” Grinning, I held it up near my face and called out Sirius’ name. The mirror fogged over for a moment, and as it cleared I could see the inside of what I guessed was the kitchen. It seemed the mirror was rather high up, because I could see the top of what looked to be a hutch opposite my viewing point and the tops of heads gathered around a long dark wooden table. One wall of the room was taken up by a counter and a few fold up tables, all laden with food. I couldn’t make out many faces of those around the table, but I distinctly heard Sirius’ voice and Mad Eye’s growl.

There was commotion and from what I could gather someone was late. Mrs. Weasley broke away from the crowd and made her way over to the oven. Tonks, Hestia, and a dark haired man followed her. The oven was opened and several pies were removed, at this my stomach began to rumble. The people about the table stopped their squawking for a moment and made room for the food to be placed in the middle. Just then a loud rumble and a crack was heard from the other side of the room which was inconveniently out of my view. All noise abruptly stopped. After a few moments the sounds of heavy dragged footsteps and light rasping breaths were heard. Mad Eye drew his wand quickly and moved quickly across the room and out of sight. Merely moments later he called out.

“Jones, Moore, get your asses over here!” Hestia and a chap with windswept blond hair rushed out of sight, wands drawn. It was at this point that I realized that I was hunched over the mirror intently, straining to see what was going on. I lifted my gaze for a scarcely a second and glanced down the hall in both directions before returning to the mirror. I hadn’t to wait long to see what the problem was, most of the people were transfixed at whatever was going on and so were

silent, Kingsley and a few other men had joined Moody and the rest and brought what looked to be a man over to the table.

The blond man, Moore, and Hestia's wands were glowing a ghostly green and Mad Eye was looking slightly worried. Kingsley parted the crowd and cleared the table. The tall Auror then gently lifted the body and set it down upon it. I caught sight of the man's face, then.

It was Snape.

Remus' gaze locked onto the far side of the kitchen as someone apparated in. The entry was rather turbulent and sloppy, judging by the sound. The agreed apparation point was near the fireplace, so as to keep all entrances in one place. It was for organization's sake really. However, when he saw the condition of the man who had appeared, all complacent thoughts vanished. It was Snape, and he was in a right mess. It appeared the others had noticed, too, as all had gone silent in the room.

Snape had always been one for appearances, but this, this was bad. The man was still in his Death Eater garb, his mask was fractured exposing one side of his face, showing a heavy bruise on his forehead and a gash on his cheek. The robes themselves were torn, and from the stiff regions near his chest, one could tell that they were caked with blood. The man moved forwards, gasping and walking heavily, obviously in pain. It wasn't until he stumbled and fell did Remus see the real damage. Snape's chest was slashed, and the blood was still pouring out. Moody rose immediately, wand drawn and hurried over. Remus and the rest of those seated stood at once. This did not bode well.

Moody called for the two most experienced Healers present, Hestia and Thomas Moore. They ran forward and approached the downed man. Hestia began conjuring water as Thomas ripped Snape's robe open. Remus rushed forward to help and was joined by Kingsley, Bill and Sturgis. Together they got him to the center table. Kingsley let go and began parting the proverbial red sea, he dispersed the crowd and brushed all of the materials that were atop the table either onto the

floor or further back along the table. Snape was placed on the table, chest up as Hestia began sterilizing the wound and the area around it.

Remus let go, and made for the door. They would need clean linens and other medical equipment that couldn't be found in the kitchen. His hand grasped the knob and turned, but he was stopped by the grip of one Molly Weasley. He spun, angry, Snape wasn't his friend by any stretch, but the man might die.

"What!" She leveled a glare at him.

"We cannot let the children get wind of this! It'll be chaos!" He stared at the woman dumbstruck. She was worried about what the kids would do at a time like this! After a few moments he removed her arm from him and opened the door.

"Would you rather our only contact within the Death Eater's circles die? I don't see how thing could get any more chaotic than it already is! Snape's chest is ripped open. Obviously something big happened today, something the Order didn't know about. Excuse me as I try to help save a man's life."

"He's right, Molly," Arthur Weasley offered as he approached behind her. He placed a hand at her shoulder, "This isn't a Hospital, or medical bay, and we have to do what we can. Most of us don't like Severus, but honestly, we need him." A snort was heard, and all three of them turned to look at who had produced it.

"Heh? Who needs him? Certainly not me," Sirius said as he walked over. He had a calm look on his face, as if nothing at all unsettling was occurring behind him. Remus' eyebrows rose.

"You don't care at all?" Sirius shook his head.

"Not one bit, the blighter probably deserved it. Figures that he'd come here in order for us to save him." He leaned against the doorframe, "G'head, Hestia moved all the medical stuff into the empty room near my dear old Dad's study. Just don't expect me to help out with caring for that scum." Remus shook his head as he left. Sometimes it

seemed as though he really was the only one that had actually grown up after leaving school.

“Some people never change. You and him for example... You’re both still idiot teenagers, holding onto idiot grudges and stereotypes,” he called back as he ascended the stairs. Molly and Arthur both stared at Sirius, who only grinned and pointed to his chin.

“I’m plenty grown up, see, beard!”

“What. The. Hell.” I couldn’t yet grasp the fact that Snape was cut open and laying on a table just down the hall. It even sounded strange when I went over it again aloud.

“Snape is cut open and laying on a table down the hall.” Something about the phrasing made it seem surreal. I glanced back the mirror that I had set in my lap, the angle wasn’t great, but I could see Hestia and this Moore fellow working on Snape. Their sleeves were rolled up and both of them seemed to be waving their wands in some sort of pattern. From the right side of the mirror I spied Lupin entering followed by Bill Weasley, they were carrying what looked to be medical supplies, I followed their forms as they approached the ‘operating table.’ Moore looked up at them and nodded, gesturing to the area just beside Snape before returning to his work. Soon the wound on the Potions Master’s chest had closed up and Moore stepped away from the table in order to lean against the counter. I turned my gaze back to the table where Hestia was continuing; her wand was emitting a yellowish light as she poured some sort of liquid onto Snape’s forehead and face, his broken mask lay on the table next to him. Before my eyes the wound disappeared, but Hestia’s form suddenly shivered and started backwards. Moody, Moore and Kingsley were upon her in an instant, steadying her as she regained her footing. The voices were a bit difficult to discern, but I caught most of what was being said.

“What’s the problem, girl,” Moody said as she was able to stand on her own. Moore looked concerned and Kingsley just looked shaken.

“The wounds were spell damage,” Hestia said quietly, so quietly that I almost didn’t catch it, “Not the good kind, either, malicious, that’s all I could pick up. Just... bad, almost as if—.” Voices jolted me from my observation, voices from down the hall. I dimly heard Moody say that all spell damage wasn’t good, before I stood and shoved the mirror into my pocket. They were coming from the direction of the trident, and were quite familiar. Ron, Hermione, and someone else, but I couldn’t place the voice with a face. I wasn’t going to face them now, not here. Their voices were far enough that the lights hadn’t come on near here, they must be angry about something, if I could hear them from where I stood. I gathered my things and took off, however I didn’t run. I wasn’t going to run from them; I was merely moving off to find lodgings.

Yeah that was it, lodgings.

Although it seemed that it wasn’t going to happen easily, as I felt a before two CRACKS rent the air announcing the arrival of two persons. However, I didn’t pick up on that in time and walked right into one of them. Fred put his hand against the wall to steady himself and glanced down slightly at me.

“Hello there, Harry. How was your summer?”

Chapter VII: Of Pirates

"Why is it that everyone greets me this way," I grumbled as I pushed past the now taller pair of Weasleys. I could feel them glance at each other synchronously, but I ignored them in favor of my escape, err... Retreat, yeah, retreat. My wonderful friends hadn't gotten any closer, but I could still hear Ron's ranting and to be honest, if he was pissed then I'd get pissed. The cycle that followed would only end up with one of us in pain. It would, in all probability, be him.

"...Because, my friend, that is how people naturally greet one another after a long period of not hearing from them," One of the twins provided from beside me, it seems as though they wouldn't just let me leave. I just grunted in response and continued to walk.

"Pray tell, Harry, where are you going?" I glanced sideways at the boy, a bit annoyed.

"Well you see, Fred, I just sort of stumbled on down here with all of my luggage in tow for a tour of the place." Fred, I suppose, for he didn't correct me, glanced at his twin.

"It seems that Harry was being sarcastic there, brother." George inclined his head and rubbed at a bit of hair that had sprouted from his chin sometime in the past few months.

"It truly does seem that he is a rather angry youth, perhaps we could help the lad?" I caught Fred grinning out of the corner of my eye.

"But, George, it would be much easier if we knew what the problem was exactly," he said. George's face broke into a similar smile, "Could it be that our dear siblings and Hermione are on their way over here? Oho! Judging from the look he's giving me, it is!"

True to his word I was giving him quite the dark look, but it was more for the fact that I was so easily read.

"Cheer up, Harry," Fred said as we moved further along the hall, Ron's voice was growing fainter.

"No, Fred, I think he has the right to be angry," George answered much to his brother's dismay. It seemed as if Fred wasn't expecting contradiction from his twin.

"Heh?"

"Well, I'd be right pissed if you, my best friend and effing brother, didn't write to me all summer," George said plainly. Fred seemed to understand and nodded his head.

"Yes, well I suppose I'd feel the same." I just kept myself out of the conversation and continued to forge onwards; hoping that they would lose interest in me and return to whatever scheme they had appeared in order to set in motion. My trunk got caught in a bit of a gap in the floor and caused me to stumble. George reached out to steady me before returning to what his brother was saying.

"-at's true and all, George, but they were forbidden from responding to his stuff," Fred offered. I stopped walking altogether, I hadn't known that. It wasn't their fault then...

"Would that have stopped you?" George asked.

"Of course not," Fred answered, then glanced at me. My mind went through a few moments of realization and anger, before Fred muttered something that sounded like, "Oh, it doesn't look too good for them, now does it?"

"No, it doesn't," I responded. Hell, I'd have sent them letters if I had been told not to. Sirius didn't listen to whomever, either, he'd corresponded with me. He had found a way. I looked at the twins, they had moved a bit ahead of me.

"Sirius sent me letters over the summer, you know. I had wondered why they were so oddly scheduled. I suppose I know, now." They glanced back at me strangely, before their faces were rent with twin smiles.

"Did he mention us?" they chorused. I thought back. My brow wrinkled a bit, I liked to think it made me look intelligent, but it could

have made me look like an ape, I wasn't too sure yet. I nodded at two Weasleys.

"Yeah, I think he did. Something about... oh, yeah your, um business, I believe." They slowed their pace and winked at each other.

"Well, we thought we'd be seeing you about this later, but why not now? Now that you have confirmed your identity and all," Fred announced as he stopped walking.

"And we can help you out of your predicament!" George added, "I'll grab his right arm, Fred."

"Right-o, then I'll get his left."

However, due to my smaller capacity for idiocy, I had no idea what was going on. That was, until they grabbed me and pulled me forward.

"Hold your breath!" It was then I realized what they were about to do. They took another step forward and turned, tugging me along with them.

My senses were overcome by darkness and my insides felt as though they were falling through my abdomen. Though, oddly, it wasn't an entirely bad feeling. I mean sure, apparating a minor like myself was inherently dangerous, but I had honestly been in worse situations.

"Welcome, friend Harry, to the headquarters within headquarters of Weasley's Wizarding Wheeze's!" I coughed and bit of saliva leaked out of my mouth.

The trip had been unsettling, to put it mildly.

"Within headquarters, George?" Fred asked letting go of my arm, I promptly dissolved onto the floor, almost taking George with me. He extricated himself and looked at his brother.

"Yes, I'm beginning to think that the Order has become the real joke around here, Fred." Fred stifled a laugh, and squinted at his twin.

"I thought we'd agreed about rehearsing puns before we used them, huh George?" The redhead in question looked sheepish.

"Erm, it was too good an opportunity to pass up." Fred raised his finger and opened his mouth, but then paused.

"This is the truth."

"I know," George said smugly, "Let's tend to our guest, shall we?" Fred offered me his hand; I took it and stood up, looking around as I did.

My surroundings were peculiar, but it was expected coming from this pair. Each of the four walls were painted a different color, one crimson, one yellow, one a deep blue, and the last white. I noted the lack of door present. At each of the four walls multiple tables were set up, each crowded with various objects and tools too numerous to name, or begin to describe. I decided not to try.

"Hey guys, you do realize there's no door in here, right?" Fred nodded once and gestured to a round table with four chairs set up around it.

"Let us sit at the table of humility and we can take turns explaining things." I inclined my head a bit and approached the table.

"Table of humility?"

"Yeah, table of humility," George said as he pulled a chair out and sat down. I did the same.

"Would that be capitalized in a document? Like, table of humility, or Table of Humility?" I questioned as Fred sat down as well.

"I... am not sure," he said, "That can be our first decision as a board." 'Twas at this moment that I realized what exactly had been in the letter. They had insisted on thanking me for the 'sponsorship' I had given them.

“Board?” I inquired.

“Yes, quite,” George answered, “The ruling body for this business in the works we have going.”

“You want me to part of it?”

“Again, yes,” Fred replied, “We figured it was the best way to return the favor. Actually, now you owe us for delaying your confrontation with the others downstairs.”

“So, this place is upstairs then,” I put in, resting my arms upon the table. I wouldn’t think of turning down their offer. If there was one thing all Weasleys had, it was pride. If I refused the offer to join their board it would injure that pride. The twins didn’t want charity.

“Yeah,” Fred said looking around at the room fondly.

“And speaking of downstairs,” George said, “We’ve got a little snippet that’ll make you tremendously happy, Harry.”

“Ok,” I said, I had a good estimate of what he was going to say.

“Apparently whilst the Order of the Phoenix was having their bi-weekly meeting someone popped in a tad late,” He continued.

“It was this hook nosed, greasy bastard that has been making our lives miserable ten months out of the twelve for the past six years,” Fred picked up.

“Snape.”

“Right in one, Harry, how did you guess?” George smirked.

“It was either him, or there’s an ogre that follows you two around and hides during the colder months,” I replied. They laughed.

“Anyway, Harry, it seems that he got his stones chopped off or something,” Fred said grinning, “Or something more disgusting than that, but I can’t fathom what.”

"Bill didn't get to tell us much before Mum pounced on us," George added, "It was 'Snape's hurt', and then 'Children leave!', poor Tonks was retching into the planter by the sink, it must've been terrible seeing Snape half naked." Ignoring the humour I asked the obvious question, "So that was why Ron and Hermione were coming down the hall?"

"Pretty much," Fred replied, "They thought we were still in the kitchen and got pretty mad about it, we figured we'd spook them and then you popped up."

"Actually, you guys popped up, but let's ignore that in favor of you explaining what the hell this place is."

"Like we said before, this is our headquarters for the time being," Fred said.

"And this is the Table of Humility," George announced.

"Yes, but where is the exit?" I asked. There was still no door in sight.

"Oh, right, you can't apparate," Fred muttered as if just realizing this, "bummer."

"That's a problem, isn't it," George said.

"I think it's a well established fact that I cannot apparate or do magic legally."

"Well, legality doesn't much matter up here, or actually anywhere in this house," George confided, "It has a history of being on the wrong side of things. We've used all the safeguards Dumbledore and Sirius' Dad used to hide the house in order to hide this one room even more securely."

"In essence," Fred picked up, "This room is safer than most everywhere but the Ministry building and Hogwarts, and it's more tastefully coloured."

"I can argue that point," I muttered looking at the yellow wall in front of me. I then glanced at them, "So, I can do magic in here?"

"Harry, amigo, you can do magic anywhere inside the grounds," George whispered. I blinked. That was good.

"Why did you whisper?"

"It's a secret," Fred replied, "The little ones still don't know."

"How would they hear you from here?" I questioned.

"It's the principle of the idea of a secret, my boy," George announced, "We all can't run about yelling secrets aloud just because no one is within earshot!"

"I'm sure you can," I replied, "You're just scared to."

"No, I'm really not," he huffed, "Secrets make the world turn."

"I thought that was money?" said Fred.

"That's a lie told to keep the secret safe," George answered simply.

"It's actually the sun," I interjected, stopping George from going further about the secret life of secrets.

"Fine, Mr. Know-All scientist, explain this away then," He brandished his wand and it let off a loud crack.

"I'd have to examine the wood, let me get my wood chipper," I said smugly.

"What's a wood chipper," Fred asked, "and does it do what I think it does?"

"It's a muggle invention and, if by that you mean shred entire logs to bits then yes," I said. George hid his wand within his robes.

"Thought so," I grinned, "Anyway how do I get out of here and what does this deal include?"

"I thought you'd be at least thrilled by news of Snape," Fred mumbled.

"Old news there, mate." They both raised their eyebrows.

"You first," I said, leaning back. They groaned.

"This is amazing, work," George said awed.

"I knew the Marauders were brilliant, but here is living proof of work from their time," Fred smiled, his eyes glinting.

"Yeah, what about the map?" I asked, recovering from the following apparition. They had brought me to another room they'd cleaned out. Somewhere I could put my things and sleep. They didn't respond.

"It'd be easier if you guys taught me how to do it on my own," I said hopefully. Not that I didn't like the twins, but I rather not have them grab me at random times. Actually I'd prefer them not grab me at all; it gets me jumpy, y'see. Plus, apparition was something I'd like to know.

"No can do Harry, you're what, fourteen?" I nodded.

"Yep, no can do," Fred replied.

"Why?"

"You haven't fully matured there, biologically speaking," George said, "Nasty complications may occur, according to the pamphlet they have at the Ministry. Trust me, we were going to try it when we were mites as well, Mum spanked us." They both grimaced as if in remembrance.

"I turn fifteen in a couple of weeks," I offered.

"Have you grown hair on your face, underarm's, or lower regions yet?" I felt some blood rush to my face.

“Erm, two out of three, and a bit of the other. I’m not saying which is which either, you two.”

“Trust us, we’d rather not know. So yeah, you can’t actually do it, but you can take a look at the instructions and such. We’ve got them at HQ,” Fred said, still examining the mirror, “I’m tempted to monacle this one, brother.”

“We cannot,” George said, he looked conflicted, “Despite how much it would further our research.”

“Just a peek?” Fred whined.

“Not possible, unless we want to admit to the two downstairs that we did,” George said sadly. I shrugged and left them to their debate, the mirror was nice and all, but I didn’t see what the big deal was.

Dad and Sirius had made them so they could talk to each other, sort of like a telephone. I honestly didn’t mind if they used their monacle on it, the eyepiece they had, now that was impressive. It let them see the finer bits of magic that had been used on an object; it didn’t work on people though. They had showed it to me during the ‘Board Meeting.’ I hauled my trunk over to the bed and began unpacking.

I was in the midst of fitting my socks into the small dresser when the two Weasleys let out twin yelps and reeled back against the wall. I dropped my sock and stared as they recovered.

“What’s up?”

“Some friend you are,” George gasped out, wincing slightly, “I can see how worried you are.” I shrugged one shoulder and picked up my sock placing it into the drawer.

“You obviously caused it upon yourself,” I said, moving towards my trunk again.

“Well, you’re going to have to cut unpacking short,” Fred said, “Mum just called us down for dinner.”

“Weren’t you looking at the mirror?”

“Yeah,” They said together.

“Then shouldn’t you have known she was going to call us?”

“I’m sorry, Harry, we’re not simple minded folk like you, we weren’t concerned with what was going on in the mirror, only how the mirror knew what was going on,” Fred replied smarmily.

“That’s great insight there,” I replied with a smirk, “What did you find?”

“Not much,” He sighed. They then winced again.

“She called again,” George said, “Remind us to get you one of these so you can share the pain of good business.” He moved his longish hair aside and pointed to his ear, hanging on the lobe was a dark wooden earring.

“I’m not too sure I want one,” I said hesitantly, I remember when Dudley had wanted to get his ear pierced earlier this summer. Aunt Petunia had taken me along for the ride; in short Dudley got to bully me on the way there, but was whimpering like a kicked puppy on the way back.

“Too bad, mater,” he replied, “It’s protocol, so we don’t get caught doing things we ought not to do, by Mum’s standards anyway.”

“How bad does it hurt?” They both looked at me and laughed.

“It doesn’t,” they chorused. I lifted my eyebrows at them, “Not at all?”

“Not at all, we numb it before and after.” I thought about it for a moment. Realizing I didn’t have much of a choice I decided to give in. It helped that I could hear the words ‘peer pressure’ resounding in my skull.

“Fine.”

“Great, we thought we’d have to muscle you for a moment,” Fred said with a large smile, “Let’s get going before they get suspicious of your whereabouts.”

“You wouldn’t have actually, right?”

They didn’t respond.

As it turns out, my new room was on the same floor as HQ, so walking was out of the question. Although I fought their decision to the very end.

“Alright guys I give up,” I mumbled, staring at the monstrosity of a staircase that I was faced with. George let out a wheeze and gave me a look that I’d rather not translate.

“I was wrong,” I muttered. Fred coughed and gave me the same look.

“Fine, you’re not the least bit homosexual.”

“Thank you,” they growled, before grabbing me by the shoulders and twisting me around. The dark came again, along with the same strange feeling and almost as soon as the pseudo-suffocation began it ended and I found myself near the trident with my back to the wall, facing Mrs. Black’s portrait. Her covering was off and apparently she was in mid-rant. Our arrival cut her off. I stared at her, she stared at me, and I resolutely stared back, despite the fact that her teeth were horrible. The twins eased off the staircase as quietly as possible leaving her attention on me. What nice fellows.

“What,” she barked finally.

“Salutations,” I replied evenly. Her eyebrows rose, they too were unkempt.

“How do you do,” she said primly.

“Not very well,” I returned. She seemed almost pleasant at this point. She had let go of the walls of her portrait and had settled down into her burgundy chair looking me over curiously.

“Why ever not?” Mrs. Black questioned, leaning forward slightly in her chair. I wanted to say ‘Because I’m staring at you’ I desperately did, but I couldn’t bring myself to listen to her shrieking.

“I’m feeling a bit hungry, to tell you the truth,” I answered, however the ‘truth’ was actually a lie.

“Ah,” she began as if realizing my ‘plight.’ I doubt portraits feel hunger, however.

“I have heard that the Blood Traitor Prewett cooks well,” she finished.

“Really?” I asked conversationally, apparently it was the wrong thing to say as her demeanor changed from complacent to irritated.

“Yes,” she hissed before regaining her composure quickly and flashing me smile. I’d rather she’d not, but beggars can’t be choosers. A shout was heard as someone dashed in front of me, startling Mrs. Black and pushing me back against the wall. Sirius glanced back at me sheepishly, “Sorry about that, ‘son.”

“I’m not too sure about the sincerity of that apology,” I said, “I was having quite the conversation with your mother, here.”

“Conversation?” He looked utterly lost; it was actually kind of amusing in a ‘make fun of the blind guy’ way.

“With her?” he continued, pointing to his mother who had stood up once more in a rage.

“Yes with me!” She growled. He turned to her shocked, “Seriously?”

He paused for a moment and chuckled, “I made a punny.”

“Yes you did, Sirius,” I said edging towards the kitchen door, “Now I’m off.”

“Hold it!” Surprisingly it was the mother not the son who said this. I paused a few inches away from the half-open door.

“Yes,” I said slowly, as if facing an angry puma. Puma’s hurt people, ask the man at the zoo.

“Why didn’t you tell me you had a child,” she shrieked at Sirius. Both of our jaws dropped simultaneously.

“You don’t think that I’m his...” I blurted out, aghast, “I mean, Sirius Black, with children! Wouldn’t that be a paradox of some sort? It’s not possible.” She seemed to contemplate this for a few moments, finally making an agreeing noise in her throat.

“That is true...” she said, “No woman would want to produce his offspring.” Sirius’ face fell.

“Great, just great,” He sighed, “My bitch of a dead mother and my godson who’s recently grown a pair of stones can put me down together. Life sucks.”

“It usually seems that way,” I interjected. He flipped me off.

“Hey, I was agreeing with you!”

“Oh,” he said blankly. A tap at my shoulder alerted me to the presence of someone at my shoulder, makes sense. I turned, it was Remus.

“What’s going on?” he muttered.

“Sirius’ Mum thought I was his son,” I whispered back. His eyes widened and he choked on ,what I believed was, his own saliva. After he got over the shock he began laughing.

“Oh yes, Remus, too!” Sirius barked, no pun intended, “Everyone have a grand ol’ laugh at my expense.”

"Fool," Mrs. Black said, glaring at the laughing lycanthrope. My guess was that despite her oddly good demeanor, her hate for werewolves was greater, "I only thought so because he looked similar to how Orion looked at that age." Sirius swept his gaze to me, giving me the same look his mother had only minutes prior.

"I suppose it's the genes he's got," he said, "He does look kind of like Dad, except for the eyes of course, those are Lily's."

"Lily?" His mother grumbled, "Oh, so this is the Potter child?"

"Yeah," I said, "I am."

"Takes after his father's side then, that must be the reason," She told Sirius, "Goodness knows how mangled he'd have been if he had taken after that mudblood."

"Must be," He said, ignoring the part about my mother, "I wonder... Harry, could you do me a favor and grow a pirate beard when you can?" Remus coughed.

"Sorry?" I asked, squinting at him, "Pirate beard?" He nodded repeatedly.

"Screw you." I turned, opened the door fully and entered, motioning for Remus to follow.

"You know, Harry," the werewolf said, "Sirius's Dad really did have a pirate beard."

Chapter VIII: Sotto Voce

"I see."

"You do?"

"No."

"Oh, well that's al—"

"You see, that's the kind of answer that got you here in the first place," I said as I set my fork down, "You're indifferent on the matter, so I think I will be, too. To me you're just Hermione now, girl with odd Greekish name that grew breasts, nothing else. You know the kind of person you pass in the hall, wave to, and then forget their name." Her face flushed and she leaned back adjusting her blouse self-consciously. I flashed her a polite smile.

Dinner was going tremendously better than I'd expected it would. So far Ron had made a fool of himself as well as upset his mother and had fallen silent in fear of punishment. Hermione had attempted to justify her actions instead of apologizing and it pissed me off to no end, almost as if 'sorry' wasn't in her ridiculously large vocabulary. It cost her my friendship. In contrast to those unsavory (for some) events, I had enjoyed a wonderful meal. Other than my talk with Ron and Hermione conversation had been fleeting and quiet, I figured it must have been the whole Snape business. My eyes settled on Hermione again, particularly her chest, much to her embarrassment.

"On the friendship scale, you're at about 'Acquaintance.' Even Mr. Filch is above you, he's at 'Creepy-but-familiar-custodial-serviceman.' Hell, even that prick is ahead of you," I finished pointing at Ron who gave me a hesitant smile, "He may be a bit thick, but he quit whilst he was ahead." His smile faltered.

"You aren't serious?" she asked. It's almost as if she thought that her friendship was irreplaceable or maybe it was that she believed she should have been ranked higher than Ron. It didn't matter either way though. True it'd take a few years to build that sort of relationship with another person, but honestly I was hoping things would work out

between us in the long run. They just needed to realize the value of friendship. I frowned slightly.

"Do I even realize the value," I mumbled, barely audible. I stared at my plate, suddenly regretting dinner.

"I think he is," mumbled Hestia who was sitting next to her. My head shot up. I hadn't expected the Healer to be present after the Snape incident, of which I was itching to inquire about, but she was, despite looking completely bushed. Hermione gave me an alarmed look.

"He's got a few loose screws," the pretty Healer muttered moving a hand to her throat, "I'd take him seriously." I was rather sorry for choking her like that but there was nothing that could be done about it now. I intended to apologize later, in a less crowded atmosphere. However insults were insults, even if they were cleverly twisted into advice.

"I'm not crazy," I groused throwing her a dark look. At least I think I'm not. Tonks made a noise from beside me. I turned my head, "What?"

"Of course if you were bonkers you wouldn't admit to it," she said cheerfully. Gee, it looks like she had been waiting for something to say.

"That was, perhaps, the most cliché thing you could have said," I replied, glaring at her, "and I was going to replace Hermione with you." I hadn't really, but if it made Hermione feel worse all the better for me.

"Well it's true, crazy people don't think they're crazy."

"Oho," I muttered mockingly, "Not only are we an overzealous Auror, but you're an expert on the human psyche as well." She rapped my knuckles with her spoon.

"Nope," she sang as I rubbed my hand, "just the Auror part, beautiful and dangerous."

"Maybe to domestic animals," I snarked. She lifted her spoon once more but found no target; I had slid my hands onto my lap. I raised an eyebrow in challenge, she picked up her fork. My other eyebrow rose.

"Try me," she replied with a sweet smile. I couldn't help it, I smiled back. Maybe it was something in their blood; all Blacks seemed to cheer people up for one reason or another.

"I-I don't think you're crazy, Harry," a small voice offered. I shifted my gaze from Tonks' purplish locks and devilish grin to the littlest Weasley's pink tinged visage on the other side of the table. Her face only grew redder. It seems she was a bit late for that conversation, but she agreed with me. That's always a good thing.

"See," I said looking across the table at Hestia, "This 'un's got the right idea."

"Oh, please," the Healer stifled a yawn, "Anyone can see she'd follow you into the Inferno itself if you asked."

"Bitch." She sat up and glared at me.

"Does being an ass come naturally to you, Potter?"

"Well if you weren't so damn antagonistic all the time..."

Sirius, who had been oddly...serious during my talk with Ron and Hermione, chose this moment to perk up and clapped a hand on my shoulder.

"I'm feeling a bit of tension here, Harry," He whispered conspiratorially, "I know the best sort of solution, fun too." The tone he said it in implied only one solution. I brushed his hand off of me and stood up, gathering my plate and utensils.

"No!"

"Why?" I glanced at Hestia who looked somewhere betwixt angry and embarrassed. She had apparently pieced together what Sirius had suggested and wasn't too thrilled at the idea. Not that I'd have had a

problem with it, personally. That was precisely what the dreams of a teenage boy like me were filled with. Attractive nurses in little to no clothing, or as the role was, Healers in little to no clothing. I just was not in the mood or mindset to convince myself to go through with any of it. Fear, I suppose, kept me away; the dreams would have to suffice.

"I don't think it's a bad idea," Tonks chirped, "I love innuendo."

"Honestly Sirius, your entire family's screwed up," I pointed out, "I'm fourteen nearly fifteen years old! She's like thirty or something!"

"Twenty two," the Healer barked her cheeks reddening further.

"Ooh, great age," he said tilting his head back to stare at me, "and strangely enough Tonks' mother is the most 'normal' Black I've ever met."

"Then I pity her for having to deal with you lot." He frowned.

"What happened to being nice to the Godfather you've rarely gotten to spend time with?"

"He gave me sperm killer," I deadpanned.

"And you'd rather run about impregnating women left and right then?" He questioned.

"I don't plan to impregnate anyone until I'm well into my adult years," I replied, "If I make it that far." I turned away and stalked over to the sink. After leaving my wares in the care of Mrs. Weasley's animated sponges, I spied a half eaten apple pie. My face brightened.

"Hey, anyone think Snape's hungry?" It was hilarious how fast the room went silent.

"What?"

"Harry," Sirius began slowly, "I doubt that Snape would want you to bring him pie."

“Lost his appetite or something?”

“No, it’s just that he was cursing your name as soon as he regained his senses,” He said, “Apparently it’s ‘your’ fault that he got his arse torn up.”

“... I see.”

“Harry?” Mrs. Weasley started. I looked at her.

“Yes?”

“How is it that you know of Severus’ condition?” I had never said anything about his condition and had opened my mouth to say such, but the twins beat me to it.

“We told him,” George interjected, “Figured it was a good piece of gossip.” Mrs. Weasley raised her hands to her temples, ready to begin berating them.

“Take it easy Molly,” Remus said swiftly cutting her off before she could begin, “I’m sure he would have found out eventually.” Fred shot him a grateful look. The werewolf then turned his gaze on me.

“Now, Harry, as it’s seemed to surface, we need to talk.”

“Something tells me that this is not going to be good,” I muttered shifting my eyes to the shadowy ceiling. The whole Avery business had been nagging at me. I could only avoid it for so long. It might help if I listened to what this ‘Order of the Phoenix’ knew. I only hoped that the Headmaster had already resolved everything.

“In all likelihood it’s not going to get any better,” Lupin confirmed. I looked at the faces present, very few of them I’d known for more than a few hours. My mouth bent sharply, not good news then.

“At least this time I screwed myself over,” I said returning to the table. Remus gave me a curious look. My brow wrinkled, “Well, it’s about Avery, isn’t it?”

“Who?”

Sirius tapped the lycanthrope on the shoulder.

“What?” Remus questioned.

“Remember that jerk that took my mutton cakes in third year?” Sirius asked, “You know the whiny one with the moccasins.” A look of comprehension slid across Remus’ features.

“Yeah, Harry and he got into a bit of a tussle in Diagon while you were trying to cuddle with the woofies,” Sirius continued, “Big fight, lots of explosions and special effects, very little plot, like a picture show.”

“Oh, that’s not a good thing.”

“You’re a sharp one, Moony,” I said gruffly.

“WHAT!” Shrieked both Hermione and Ginny at roughly the same time, Ron simply stared, shocked. The twins cheered. Mrs. Weasley stood and pointed at the exit, her face blotchy with rage.

“Why thank you, I do believe I’ll exeunt,” I said.

“Not you,” Remus said as Sirius grabbed my arm. I huffed out a breath and looked about the room.

“Bathroom breaks?”

“Sit,” he said. The others had not jumped at the chance to be excused however, and had remained rooted to their seats.

“Out!” Mrs. Weasley ordered. I fought the urge to scramble out of my chair and rush off to bed. They didn’t realize how nice it was that adults handled everything. I really appreciated the Headmaster saving my sorry arse from expulsion and the lockup. I truly did. Jail sucks. I honestly did not want to hear that I might actually be going to Azkaban, or that Hogwarts was no longer an option. I really didn’t

want to know what had caused Snape's condition and how it was related to me.

Mrs. Weasley ordered them out again.

"Mum, w-we want to know what's going on, too!" Ginny argued.

"No you really don't," I said bluntly, "Even I don't, it's the truth."

Mrs. Weasley yelled once more, but they refused to move, the twins using their age as reason enough, which Mr. Weasley backed albeit timidly. Apparently his backing wasn't enough because she threatened to confiscate their wands if they didn't leave. Slowly they stood and made for the exit, but not before Fred winked at me and flashed the mirror discreetly.

"Ah," I mumbled, "Geniuses, that's what they are."

"What was that?"

"I said your breasts are big, Tonks," smiling slightly as the twins bowed out. She elbowed me lightly.

"They are not!"

"Whatever you say," I replied leaning back. I watched as Mrs. Weasley named the various privileges that she'd revoke if they didn't leave, and soon it came to where Ron wouldn't be able to get a new broom if he stayed. Muttering an apology to Hermione he exited. It didn't take long for the other two to take their leaves; Hermione mumbled something and followed Ron as soon as her parents were mentioned. Ginny followed quickly without further trouble as Hermione left, leaving me as the sole adolescent in the kitchen. I put on a broad, fake smile.

"Well, let's have a fun discussion, shall we?"

These stairs were quickly becoming another trouble on my list of problems. I tripped down the last few and onto the landing of the

second floor. I frowned at the last set of stairs in front of me. Then again, Orion Black's study was on this floor and it was an oddly cheerful place. Deciding to visit the creepy clown doll once again I took the left hall and followed it for a short distance. Upon reaching the navy blue door I slid the key Sirius had given me into the keyhole and opened the door.

A week had passed since I had first arrived here and I had come to actually enjoy the routine I had fallen into. It's almost as if I wouldn't be on trial in a month's time. Almost as if Voldemort wasn't pissed that I hadn't been killed, of course he didn't take it too well that Avery had tried to kill me. According to Snape, who had healed up in four days time, he had ordered the man to drop any charges against me.

Somewhere a cute fuzzy tiger cub died of bladder failure. Shit like this doesn't happen. Voldemort had saved me a whole lot of trouble. I still had to show up for the underage magic hearing and then one with Avery, but Kingsley and the rest had assured me that everything would go well. Snape hadn't been too thrilled at that.

The scent of tangerines greeted me as I entered. My cleaning charms were subpar, the best scent I could produce was either tangerine or lemon, and I preferred tangerine. My eyes settled on the large hardwood desk and then trailed up to the portrait above it. Mr. Black was asleep. My hand batted the door shut behind me. The man was the quiet, austere sort. He had been polite until I mentioned the fact that I didn't like his wife a whole lot. He then proceeded to curse my entire family. It was apparent that he actually loved her for some reason. The reasoning behind it still evades me. After my first relatively pleasant chat with Mrs. Black she had gone back to being a complete bitch. She did tone down her shrieking a smidge when I was present but other than that it was as if the first conversation had never happened.

I glanced up at his face, it looked peaceful.

"Poor chap," I muttered edging towards the bookcase and by proxy the clown, "Was the sex that great?" He didn't stir. I shrugged and looked towards the stacked shelves. His collection was amazing, even from my limited knowledge on literature. I'd have expected to

find volumes of evil magic or maybe human sacrifice instructions, but instead there were pamphlets of poetry, prose, and philosophy piled high. Hermione would have had a seizure if she had seen the author list, even I knew some. Cornelius Agrippa, Ptolemy, Valdes, Rellen, Nicolas Flamel, Gellert Grindlewald, to name a few of the wizards. Astonishingly, there were muggle names as well. I knew Chaucer, Marlowe, Neruda, and Nietzsche, but there were many other semi-familiar names. Were they also wizards? Orion seemed to be a fairly intelligent man, but for all the pureblood dogma that was present I found it hard to believe he supported muggles. Present were also two names I had never seen on a book's spine. Dumbledore and Riddle. A slim yellow manuscript on display had the Headmaster's name emblazoned on the front, where as a thick leather-bound green tome had the name 'Thomas M. Riddle' embossed on the spine. Residing next to Dumbledore's work was the clown. I gave him a wink and reached for the book.

This was the main reason I had returned, I knew so little about the man everyone seemed to know so much of. He had swayed the Ministry of Magic and could make Voldemort tremble in his boots—wait, I don't believe Voldemort wears shoes.

"Well figuratively, I suppose," I said to myself. He had even stunned Crouch with just his presence last year; I doubt he had really needed to actually stun the man. Albus Dumbledore was effectively the Wizarding world's Elvis. My hand closed around the spine of the manuscript and removed it from its stand. The clown stood up. I froze. It stretched its legs and leapt onto my face.

"What the hell!" I grabbed at it. The clown's body was of a soft material but it was surprisingly resilient. I couldn't pull it off of me. My left hand let go of the book and it fell to the ground. The clown abruptly stopped moving, hands still clenching my tufts of my hair. I tried to open its fists, but 'twas no use. The thing was stuck. I had a freaking clown attached to my head.

"Serves you right," a crisp voice announced from behind me. I turned around swiftly, the clown spun wildly along, pulling my hair. I winced and stared at Orion's portrait. The painting was awake and looked quite amused.

"I am not amused," he said, beard twitching. I grunted and pointed at my head.

"What kind of sick joke is this?"

"There is nothing humorous about the clown," he replied, "Why did you interfere with my belongings?"

"That is a contradiction, clowns are meant to be funny," I told him, avoiding his question, "How do you get it off?"

"You do not." He said haughtily.

"You know what?" I began, reaching into my pocket for my wand, "I'm going to rip this thing to shreds."

"No!" I lifted it and pressed it into the clown's stomach.

"Then get it off," I said. It was like I had a hostage or something.

"I cannot, my life has ended," the portrait replied quickly, "I have no command over it."

"Then tell me how to do it," I said getting annoyed with its weight on my face. Orion said nothing. An idea struck.

"I've got it," I grinned, setting my wand on the shelf. I grabbed the clown around the middle, much to his displeasure. I then crouched down and picked up Dumbledore's book. Instantly the clown came alive letting go of my hair and boxing me about the head. I jerked it away from me and held it up towards Orion. It kicked and wriggled in my grasp. I let go of the book, it slumped forward.

"Problem solved," I said, "It is kind of cute, maybe I'll keep 'im in a cage or something." The man grumbled something incoherently.

"Pardon? I didn't catch that."

"He's only an actor, don't hurt him," Orion said, almost pleadingly.

"I'm sorry, I didn't know actors were that violent," I replied smugly, dangling the clown by a single foot.

"Listen up, Potter," The painting growled, "I'm going to let you keep him because you seem interested in literature, unlike my children."

"Sirius wasn't too keen on reading, was he?" I questioned.

The portrait snorted, "Neither was Regulus. Go ahead and take him. Feste was enchanted to guard that volume, the command is 'Ovid' to change tasks."

"Feste?"

"That is his name." I shrugged and said the command; the clown's body went rigid.

"Now give him a command," Orion said.

"Um, don't hurt me. Ever." The portrait sighed as the clown head bobbed.

"Is there a problem with not wanting to be attacked," I asked him. The portrait sighed again.

"Don't worry about it, lad. Is there any reason you happened to pick that one out?" I glanced at the manuscript on the ground. Holding Feste away from me, I picked it up and was relieved to see that the clown didn't attempt to pounce. I looked at the page it was opened to, it seemed to be handwritten.

"Yeah," I answered, "I've never seen anything written by Albus Dumbledore before." The man let out a laugh; I shifted my eyes to his mirth filled face.

"Hogwarts?" He asked. I nodded. His grin widened.

"Of course the man wouldn't let any of his own works into the curriculum," Orion said, "He has humility bordering on arrogance." I

blinked. That didn't make sense. Seeing my confusion, Orion chuckled.

"I'll let you figure that one out, Potter."

"You're just as ambiguous as he is," I grumbled, stuffing my wand back into my pocket. The man made an amused sound.

"You'll realize soon enough."

"Yeah, sure," I replied moving over to the armchair on the other end of the room, "And maybe someday chickens will lay mice instead of eggs." Orion laughed. I shrugged; I didn't think it was that funny. My eye caught the time on my watch. 9:47, I was late for breakfast.

"I'll be back in a bit," I said, dropping Feste and Dumbledore's book onto the cushion of the chair, "Breakfast is calling."

"You needn't leave Feste, he longs for company," the portrait said. I looked at the little clown, he indeed did look sad.

"Fine, I'll introduce him to some people," I muttered as I picked him up, "Can I take the book, also?" Orion shook his head.

"I think it would be better if you left that particular volume in here. Lord knows what kind of people that man has brought into my home. Feste, at least, will be with you at all times." The last part sounded like a command more than a statement.

I nodded at him and bid farewell.

I'm rather sure Hermione has an irrational fear of clowns as well as failing grades. A giddy smile split my face.

Chapter VIII: Sentinels

Where is the dark I came to find?

Locked away; these dividing walls

Silhouettes separating,

Blind eyes stark to the sky

Always, be the least connected

Stay true to the last rasping breath

Cut ties with useless company

The core of ignorance and fear

Layer reality

Where is the flicker of fire?

Something only you can see

What is the core of insanity?

Feste lay upon my pillow looking bleak, well more bleak than usual. It looks as if the poem depressed him as much as it did me. The little clown's painted face was pressed against the pillowcase as if stemming tears. I felt the same way. It wasn't that it was sad or even meaningful, I just didn't get it. Even a young Dumbledore somehow managed to baffle me. When I first realized that the manuscript I had held as if it were treasure had turned out to be the inane ramblings of a teenage boy I was livid. Orion had held the book in such high regard going so far as to display it, when in actuality it was just a journal. I had scoured the book seven times in the past two weeks, seven times! Still nothing stood out as much as this poem. It was repeated every time New Year's rolled around in the journal. A rough version of the same poem even started off the first section. And what's more I hadn't expected to Dumbledore's work to be so... blue.

After reading up on the authors that a younger Dumbledore would have admired I still found no deeper meaning to anything he wrote. It was as if the Dumbledore I knew had even more guile as a child.

“Ariana today made waffles using the new iron, they were quite good. I have since realized that she added spices into the mix that Mother hadn’t instructed her to,” I read from one passage. There was nothing worthwhile I could glean from that. Ariana was his sister, younger. She was mentioned many times throughout the journal, although his opinion of her changed drastically as the years passed. He had been extremely kind and protective of her when the writing had begun, but as the book progressed he became less and less tolerant of her. When I reached the final pages of the journal she wasn’t even mentioned by name. It seemed as though she was scorned because had little magical power, from what I could gather anyway. It was strange; she was the opposite of me. I had been forced to do the housework because I was a wizard, whereas she was held in contempt because she lacked magic ability. What a nasty business being different is, no matter where you are it’s still the same.

I closed the book with a grunt of frustration; this line of thinking didn’t help me understand Dumbledore any better. It just confirmed the nature of society. The journal abruptly ended three months after his fifteenth birthday. The following time must’ve been where he really started to grow and establish himself. It would be of no use to further ponder on this.

My hand reached out and propped Feste up. The little fellow had been the majority of my company during my stay here. I had talked with Orion also, he was rather insightful, but as I had thought, he was also dogmatic. He appreciated the works of the muggle authors but downplayed their significance and wit. He also extolled the works of Agrippa and Rellen, which I did see reason for, but it didn’t excuse his close-mindedness. The man had introduced me to many new friends. Orion also lacked the humour that his son possessed in abundance. Although after days of Sirius’ antics it begins to grate on your nerves. It was best in small quantities, but I didn’t dare tell him that in fear of estranging him. In short life had been decent. I wasn’t sifting through the rubble and recovering nostalgic photographs, but I was content to continue as I was.

I rolled onto my back and stared at the ceiling for a bit. My stomach rumbled. I continued to stare.

“Dance, minion!” I commanded after I got bored, um—bored-er, more bored, whatever. Feste stood shakily and leapt onto my chest and danced a jig. It was amusing; I applauded after he finished, much to his embarrassment. He ducked his head and scuffed his foot on my shirt. I grinned. My alarm buzzed, Feste’s head snapped up and towards the clock. I counted to six mentally and watched as he jumped at it and beat it into submission. After his task was finished he leaned against the lamp and slumped down.

“Morning routine, commence!”

“Where is the damned cereal, woman!” My Cap’n Crunch was missing.

“You ate the rest for dinner last night, Harry,” Tonks yawned. She was sipping some steaming liquid from a mug at the table, as the rest of the household sought to find victuals. It seems as though Mrs. Weasley was missing, so the kitchen was in disorder.

“I know what I did last night, Tonks,” I grumbled, “But why isn’t there more?”

“Because you ate it!”

“No need to snap,” I said, “I only asked a simple question. By the way did you happen to notice that MY CEREAL IS GONE?” At my outburst Hestia jumped and dropped the kettle into the sink. She grabbed me by the front of my shirt and shoved my head over said sink.

“There goes all the tea, idiot!” She yelled, as if I didn’t know where the tea had gone. Someone obviously wasn’t too cheery in the morning. I allowed her shake me for a moment before demanding release, civilly of course. She let me go and calmed herself down, reaching into the

sink for the emptied kettle. I backed away quickly and sat next to Tonks.

"I take it she still doesn't like me," I whispered.

"She's just stressed is all," Tonks whispered back, "There wasn't really a need for Healers in the Order until recently. I think she's just now realizing that this could get dangerous."

"Yeah it hits you after a bit, I remember it only took me about a month or two to realize someone was trying to kill me in that tournament," I replied quietly, "I started to take it seriously then. The thing is, they weren't trying to kill me, just scare me into thinking they were trying to kill me. If that makes any sense." I glanced up at her face, she looked genuinely curious.

"No, go on. I haven't heard the full story, only the part where You-Know-Who returned," Tonks said eagerly, "Well, I followed it in the Prophet and at work, but there was too much gossip in the story to get any of the action out of it."

"I take you would've like to be one of the Champions?" She nodded.

"I really would have, but I doubt Hogwarts would have supported a Slytherin Champion," she said wistfully. My eyebrows rose. She nodded again and answered the unasked question.

"Yeah, all of my family, except for Sirius, has been in Slytherin." I stared disbelievingly at her. That did not compute. Tonks was way too happy to have been in Slytherin. I would have expected Hufflepuff or maybe Gryffindor.

"I know, but what the hat says, goes. A good portion of your family have been in there also, so don't knock it," she defended.

"Really?"

"Yes," she said, "It's not a very nice or welcoming house, but it has a long history of producing excellent witches and wizards."

"Alright, alright," I muttered, "I believe you, but seriously, my family?"

"Yeah, most British pureblood families have some history with Slytherin house, some more than others."

"Sure and 'wizards' comes before 'witches', to let you know."

"Bastard," she said good-naturedly, "We're better."

"Well, since you're better and all, would you mind getting me some cereal. I'm feeling a bit hungry. I'll tell you about the tournament later." She pushed her plate in front of me; on it was a pastry with what looked to be a cherry filling.

"Eat."

"No thanks, I prefer Cap'n Crunch," I said, sliding the plate back.

"And where am I supposed to find Cap'n Crunch?"

"The supermarket," I said reflexively.

"So you want me to risk exposure by popping over to the local supermarket and then back here," she asked incredulously.

"Sounds about right," I said, "You could use that shape-shifty thing that Hermione and Ginny keep talking about, might help." She blushed.

"I'd rather not," she said.

"Why?"

"I don't want to," she said defensively.

"Well, your choice then," I grumbled, "Just gets me my cereal." I glanced about the room, surprisingly Hermione, Ginny and the twins were all missing. Ron sat at the other end of the table looking at me timidly. I suppose I was a bit hard on him, he hadn't even put up that much of a fight.

I sighed.

“Hey Ron, where is everyone else?” He blinked, started to say something, and then stopped. He looked conflicted, mouth half open.

“Sorry about the letters,” he said finally.

“What?”

“I’m sorry about the letters, alright,” he said again.

“No, I didn’t ask you how sorry you were, idiot. I asked you where the rest of the idiots were.” Tonks giggled nervously.

“You see, Harry,” He began slowly, “I don’t know where they are.” He was lying; he knew full well where they were.

“Ok, if that’s the way you want mend a broken friendship...”

“No, I mean, I ca—I don—I mean, I dunno.”

“I’ve got it,” Tonks announced. I swiveled around as she clapped her hands giddily.

“Got what?” I asked.

“It,” she said proudly, “C’mon Harry, you too Ron, get some bowls and spoons from the cupboards, we’re going on a trip!”

“Why would we need bowls to go on a trip?” Ron asked, “And I don’t think we’re supposed to leave, Tonks. Mum’ll flip.”

“What’s the matter, Ron? I don’t see your Mum anywhere,” I told him, “Let’s go.” Tonks got up and pranced over to the door.

“You wanted cereal, right?”

“Correct,” I answered, “So, how’re we going to escape?” She shrugged and left. I stood and gathered the required utensils before

making for the exit as well. It would take my mind off the Dumbledore case, at least. Ron followed us after a moment's hesitation.

(12 August 1995, 6:39 A.M.)

"It'll all be over soon, dear," Mrs. Weasley assured me, "In a few hours time you'll be cleared."

I said nothing.

"It will be quick if things go accordingly," Mr. Weasley said, playing with the collar of his bomber jacket, "It's taking place on my floor as well, so I won't be too far away. Ms. Bones is presiding I believe. Nice woman."

"Yeah, Harry," Tonks said patting my arm, "She's smart and fair, saved my job many a time." I bit back a witty remark and moved her arm off of my own. Wasn't feelin' it.

"Snape better be right about this," Sirius growled from across the table, "Otherwise, I'll kill him for real this time." He dug his fork into his omelet and continued to eat. Just looking at the food was making me nervous. This was either going to screw me over for the rest of my life or it was going to screw me for a short amount of time. I'm not sure which I feared more.

"Even if," Lupin began, "Even if Voldemort changed his mind, which I doubt, you have a strong chance of winning, Harry. It was self-defense. I can't believe I'm saying this, but Rita Skeeter did a good job reporting on the story. That should help."

"Finish up, Harry, we need to get going soon," Mr. Weasley announced, wiping the remnants of his breakfast off of his face, "I'm not too familiar with arriving through the visitor's entrance." I glanced down at my waffles. I thought of Ariana, Aberforth and of course Albus Dumbledore. I decided not to even attempt eating. The name Dumbledore didn't connote agreeable feelings any longer. I pushed my plate towards Tonks, who gazed at me concernedly.

“Not hungry,” I muttered, standing. I lifted my blazer from the back of my seat and slipped it on. It’s necessary to look smart for occasions such as these. It might make them a bit more sympathetic if I look presentable. Street-urchin chic was out of style this season. I smiled weakly.

At that moment a scuffle was heard from beyond the kitchen door. There came the ‘mrowl’ of a cat and a resounding thump. Mrs. Weasley hurried over to see what the issue was. As she opened the door she let out a yelp. Feste came marching through, towing a letter along behind him. He was puffed up proudly. Mrs. Weasley darted out into the hall and returned with a dirty, upset-looking Crookshanks. I stared at the clown, my brow wrinkled.

“You did that?” I said slowly gesturing at Hermione’s cat. The little comic nodded and swung the letter over his head, offering it to me. I bent down and picked both of them up. Setting Feste on the table I looked at the letter, it had the Ministry’s seal on it. Mr. Weasley appeared at my shoulder and read it along with me.

Dear Mr. Potter,

At the behest of the Minister of Magic, Cornelius Oswald Fudge, and his desire to be present during your hearing, the aforementioned hearing has been rescheduled to precisely 8 O’clock AM. Furthermore it will take place in Courtroom 10 of the Ministry of Magic. We thank you in advance for your cooperation.

Sincerely,

Dolores Jane Umbridge

Senior Undersecretary to the Minister

“What. The. Fuck,” I whispered. What in Merlin’s excessively famous name were they playing at?

“My thoughts exactly, Harry,” Mr. Weasley said unenthusiastically, staring at his watch, “It’s now six-fifty-one, let’s get going, before they spring another one on us.” He looked one more time at the letter and

approached the fireplace, looking for floo powder. I set it down upon the table where Remus, Sirius, and Tonks jumped on it like a pack of wild dogs. I grabbed Feste up and set him in my breast pocket. Mrs. Weasley approached me under the pretense of combing my hair one last time, but I waved her off.

“The hearing or trial or whatever’s been rescheduled. It starts in an hour or so,” I told her in a detached way as the others passed around the letter, “I think we’re going to leave now.” I pushed past her and approached Mr. Weasley who had gotten the fire to a manageable level. He gave me a small smile and held out the floo powder.

“After you, Harry,” he said quietly, “The address is Ministry of Magic, Atrium.” I nodded and took the proffered powder. Tossing it into the fire I spoke the address clearly, shut my eyes and stepped forward into the flames.

I still hadn’t quite grasped ‘the art of the floo’ properly, so upon my exit I fell forward and lay sprawled on the ground for a while. The clown squirmed in my pocket, his face pressed to the floor. After I had composed myself I stood up and was greeted by the unfriendly face of a scruffy looking man.

“State your name and business,” He said bluntly.

“Oh—erm, Harry Potter, I’m here for a hearing,” I replied. The man grumbled something under his breath and fiddled with something at his belt. I took the time to dust myself off and straighten up my attire. At last, he thrust a small shiny badge at me and jerked a thumb behind him. I pinned the badge on my jacket. Feste stuck an arm out and rubbed at the badge.

“Weigh your wand in at the desk,” The man said giving my companion a funny look, “Then you may proceed to your destination. Have a nice day.” I nodded at him but stood still. Mr. Weasley hadn’t arrived. The man grunted and motioned for me to move as someone arrived behind me.

“Sorry, I’m just waiting for someone.”

“They’re probably at one of the other fires,” he replied gesturing behind him. I finally looked at where he was pointing. My jaw dropped. It was remarkable. The atrium was a long beautiful hall. The floor was of a dark polished wood and the ceiling a deep calming blue, scrolling across it was a variety of golden symbols that looked like the runes Hermione gushed about for hours on end. Across the hall, the wall was lined with gilded fireplaces that matched the row that I was standing in. It was there that people departed judging from the groups that clustered around some. About midway through the hall was an awing fountain with statues made out of what looked to be solid gold. Standing in the middle was a statue of a tall proud looking wizard, wand pointed straight up. Around him stood a centaur, a witch, a goblin, and a house-elf. The house-elf looked up at the wizard and witch adoringly, while the centaur stared at the heavens and the goblin squinted at the house-elf peculiarly. Amid all of the grandeur was the hurly-burly of the early morning work shift. Masses of people moved almost as one towards the golden gates at the end of the hall.

“First time?” he asked.

“Yeah,” I replied still taking it in.

“It’s nice isn’t it; this is the heart of our society.”

“It’s amazing!”

“Yeah, yeah, now scram,” he said shooing me off as another person arrived behind me. Shooting the man a displeased look, I left.

“Hey, Potter,” the man called after me. I turned, puzzled.

“Good luck.” I inclined my head at him and moved off towards the kiosk where my wand was to be weighed. As I got closer to the stand Mr. Weasley found me. He approached looking a bit shaken.

“Sorry, sorry, Molly held me up back at...well you know,” he puffed, “I take it you need to check in at security?” I nodded and slowed my pace to match his as we neared the security desk. A roughly shaven man in dull brown robes was sitting behind the desk, I cleared my

throat in order to get his attention. He looked up and put his paper down.

“Can I help you, son?”

“I take it you’re security?” I asked him. The man nodded.

“Well then, get securing,” I answered removing my wand from within my blazer. He held up a hand.

“Gotta check you with this first,” He muttered ruffling about behind the desk. He produced a long thin gold antennae-thing. He passed it both in front and back of me, before grunting, “All right, wand.” I handed it to him and watched as he dropped it on a apparatus that looked like a scale.

“Ah, I get it, weighed,” I mumbled trying to ease the anxiety of not having my wand on my person. That was what caused this entire mess in the first place, my damned paranoia. A slip of paper, almost like a receipt, was expelled from a slit near the base of the device. The man read this as he plucked my wand off of the scale.

“Phoenix-feather core, Eleven Inches, been in use for four years, correct?”

“Correct,” I answered. He gave me back my wand and stared at my badge.

“Have a nice day, Mr.—” His eyes darted up to my forehead. I gave him a winning smile. Mr. Weasley grasped my shoulders and steered me toward the gates.

“Thank you, Eric.”

“My name’s Jim,” the man replied. Mr. Weasley shrugged and hurried me on.

“It’s quarter after, Harry,” He said quickly as we passed through the gates and moved towards the numerous lifts, “It’s better to be early than to be late. I’ll get you down there now, but my department isn’t

permitted into any of the old courtrooms, so we'll have to hope Albus got the memo as well."

I grunted in response. I was feeling a bit Anti-Dumbledore at the moment. Mr. Weasley led me to the end of the hall where a lone lift was waiting with no queue. Marked above it were three words.

Department of Mysteries

Suddenly, I felt a pain in my scar. I stumbled in after Mr. Weasley and leant against the wall. He looked at me, concerned.

"Harry, is everything alright?"

"Yeah, yeah, I'm fine," I mumbled, pulling myself together. It wouldn't do to go all mental during the hearing. That would only prove the world right. I blinked away the discomfort and stood up straight.

Hell, maybe I was bonkers, but dealing with that'd have to wait until I proved to Bones that I wasn't. The previous statement was completely sane, I swear it.

Chapter IX: Icarus

Mr. Weasley fidgeted all along the ride down to the Department of Mysteries. Once the lift doors opened he stood for a moment as if contemplating whether or not this was the correct floor. I looked out, observed the worn red carpeting and paisley wallpaper, and exited. It seemed safe to me. Mr. Weasley made a strange sound and hurried after me. I spied a door ahead, at the far end of the hall. It was made of a dark wood, and seemed to give off a feeling of mysteriousness that pulled me towards it, it being so plain compared to the walls and floor.

When I was about halfway to down the hall, another hall opened up abruptly to my left. Mr. Weasley grabbed my shoulder and tugged me down it, so that he was now leading. I paused and peeked around the wall, staring at the mysterious door at the far end. Mr. Weasley didn't seem to notice that I wasn't following him. I stared at the door. It seemed decidedly familiar, as well as mysterious. Paradoxical, no?

"Harry!" I looked over my shoulder. Mr. Weasley, who was a ways down the hall, had stopped walking and was beckoning to me. I beckoned back. He mumbled something to himself and began to make his way back.

"What's through that door over yonder?" I asked him as he approached. He too peeked at the door, an unsettled look on his face. He turned away from it.

"That leads into the Department of Mysteries, Harry. It's best for us to leave it be," he whispered, "Come." He turned around and began to walk back. I continued to look at the door. The nagging sense of familiarity ground at my nerves as I backed away. I rubbed at my temples and followed Mr. Weasley. There would always be the return trip. I grinned, see, optimism. He looked at me queerly, but when I asked him what the matter was he answered with a token, "Nothing."

After we made a left turn, the scenery changed. The red carpeting gave way to cement floors, and the walls, which had been papered, were now as barren as a liger. We followed the dull hall in silence. Soon we came to an even less appealing flight of stairs. Upon seeing

it, Mr. Weasley seemed to calm down quite a bit. He descended first, signaling me to follow after him.

We went down. The corridor we entered reminded me of school. The walls were lined with torch brackets that looked to be of the same make as the ones that ran along Hogwarts' many corridors. The stone walls were of the same dirty grey as Snape's dungeons and the floor's setts were laid in the exact pattern as the greasy Potions Master's classroom. I would know, without ceiling tiles it's rather difficult to pass the time in that class. It was as if the Ministry had hired the same contractor as Hoggy Warty Hogwarts. I began to hum the tune of the school's song, which happened to be "God Save the Queen" this time around, as Mr. Weasley and I walked briskly through the dank hallway. It kept me from twitching at the disturbing scenery we soon came across.

I'm all for the medieval dungeon look, but you reach a point where it becomes too much. I mean, the giant dark wood doors with disproportionately large padlocks upon them nearly whispered, 'Danger Be Here, Lad.' The large iron storm drains that we passed every so often actually did vocalize. Nothing intelligible, but it was creepy nonetheless. Mr. Weasley was busy counting the doors, not bothered in the least. He stopped counting once we spotted a door that was opened slightly, letting a bit of orange light escape into the hall.

"Right, Harry," he began as we drew even with the door, "In you get. I'm sorry, but I can't come with you."

"Not a problem," I said cheerily, "It always ends up this way, you know." He looked a bit shamed.

"I'm positive that Albus received the change of time as well, He'll be here." He looked down the hall.

"He'll be her—." I grunted. I hadn't been a fan of Dumbledore lately, especially after the fiasco of a birthday party I had. To make a long story moderately short, we had returned from getting my cereal only to find out that Mrs. Weasley had thrown me a surprise party. I was surprised of course, however, I was hit with an abnormally large flash

of happiness from Voldemort at the same time, causing me to black out. Dumbledore showed up to help out, but left before I woke up. I woke up on the drawing room floor, about three minutes after I'd passed out.

I nudged the door open more with my knee and entered, leaving Mr. Weasley in mid-speech. I closed the door behind me. Looking around, I noted that I was in some sort of foyer. There was a table in front of me with a single gas lamp upon it. I turned right, crossed the entrance area and went through a plain black door.

The actual courtroom was huge. It was circular in shape, the floor was stone, and I could not see the ceiling from where I was standing. Yeah, it was that tall. As I lowered my gaze, I saw where I suppose the Wizengamot or whoever was to be seated. Roughly 20 feet above me, seats were arranged in a circular fashion around the room. A single high-backed chair stood higher than the rest in the center, and from there seats dropped in prominence as they circled the room, the ones behind me being the very lowest. They had taken King Arthur's round table of old and destroyed the concept. There was also one other thing on my mind, the full Wizengamot? For underage magic and a brawl? They weren't all here though, only a few older men in dark robes were fumbling with papers and holding whispered conversations near their not so prominent seats. There was no sign of anyone that could be Madam Bones.

"Sviene," I breathed, feeling Feste go limp in my pocket. It wasn't time for the clown's antics; it could cost me the trial. Dropping my gaze to my normal eye level, I looked ahead. Near the front were two tables, the one on the left having a single unoccupied chair, and the one on the right having two chairs. The leftmost chair was empty, but the one on the right was occupied by the man I now knew to be Thomas Avery. Standing between both tables was the Minister of Magic, Cornelius Oswald Fudge, and a tall man in tailored crimson robes. The man held a silver snake-headed cane at his side. It was Lucius Malfoy. I blinked. Not good. I stood rooted to the spot, thinking. Malfoy parlaying with Fudge was not something I wanted. If he was here, Voldemort may have fooled us. Snape could have lied to the Order of the Phoenix.

I knew there had to have been reason for not dropping the charges earlier. I thought on it, watching the men converse. If we had been tricked, Voldemort would have me in jail and the Headmaster would be further discredited for trying to help me. We were the only people in Britain's public eye to believe in his return. However, putting me in prison now would do nothing for Voldemort. I've been slandered for the entire summer and if I were to be locked up it would just be another thing to tack onto my list of faults. Dumbledore has already lost any major influencing power he had. I doubt Chocolate Frog card portraits were going to sway public opinion. People still would be none the wiser to the Dark Lord returning.

I looked at the speaking pair, and then to Avery. He seemed to be sleeping soundly on the table. I debated on whether or not to take a seat. Fudge and Malfoy weren't speaking loud enough for me to overhear what they were talking about, and I figured I'd look like an idiot, or worse, a coward, if someone saw me staring at the Minister and his buddy for an extended period of time. Rocks and hard places. Sighing, I looked at my shoes, making sure they were tied. I checked my fly, buttoned up my jacket and walked calmly over to the small unoccupied table. As I approached, Malfoy stopped talking, and when he caught sight of me, so did Fudge. I greeted them politely before taking a seat. Malfoy watched me closely the entire time.

"Minister," Lucius said after looking me over, "You don't mind if I have a small talk with Mr. Potter, do you?" Fudge shook his head. I looked at the Minister out of the corner of my eye. He was wearing the almost exact same ensemble as that other times that I'd seen him previously, black robes, dark green waistcoat, dark pants, and purplish bowler hat. He was holding the hat near his chest.

"Not at all," He replied, taking a step back. Malfoy gave him a look. I don't exactly know what kind of look it was, but it involved his eyes, eyebrows, and nose. The Minister looked as if he didn't exactly know what kind of look it was either.

"You also wouldn't mind retrieving those forms for me, would you?"

"Oh, certainly not, Lucius!" He made no move to leave, however. Malfoy tapped his cane on the ground.

“Presently, Cornelius,” Malfoy said. An offended look came over Fudge’s face. The blonde man stared at the Minister until he turned and made for the center seat above. As soon as Fudge reached his seat, Malfoy turned to me.

“Stand, Mr. Potter.” I looked up at him.

“Why?”

“I wish to have a talk.”

“About?” Malfoy’s lip curled up at one side. I couldn’t tell if it was a smile or a sneer.

“Your options.” My hand slipped into my pocket and gripped my wand. I looked up at Fudge who seemed to be sifting through a large pile of papers.

“Never mind him,” Malfoy said laying his cane on the table with a clack. Avery let out a snuffling sound.

“Why?” Lucius put his hand on the back of my chair and pulled it out.

“Cease with the monosyllables and get up, boy,” He murmured. He didn’t sound angry, but his expression implied it. He was taking pains to be civil. I stood, news is news. He inclined his head to me.

“I could not let the Minister know that that which he has been refuting for the past couple of months is, in fact, true,” Lucius said in a lowered voice, turning so that he was facing a section of the room that was completely empty. He seemed in no way ashamed that he was playing Fudge. Although, I suppose once you’ve pledged yourself to a dogmatic mass-murderer with the face of an albino viper, everything short of genocide seems a mite trifling. However, staring at his bland expression, I couldn’t help being angry at the man.

“It’s pretty much your fault then, that every respectable paper has been defaming me, and nearly half of England’s magic population hates me You can’t man up and announce your allegiance,” I said,

“Well, I have no problems letting Fudge know that Voldemort is back and you’ve been capering about behind that nifty mask.” Malfoy looked down at me.

“Nonsense, my allegiance is to Britain, Harry Potter. And don’t expect to end this chat quickly, Cornelius won’t return until he has found the form I requested,” He whispered. He opened the front of his robes and allowed me to see a folded sheet of parchment tucked into an inside pocket. He smiled at me as I realized what it was.

“Fudge is the biggest and most powerful fool in government now, and if you oppose him here, he will find a way to put you away for a very long time. Just listen, I can help you.”

“What makes you think that I’d take help from you or your Dark Lord?” I asked. He scrunched up his forehead at my tone.

“If you listen to me, Fudge will look like more of a fool and we will both leave here safely,” he said quietly, “First, I’d advise you release your wand.” I looked at him. His smile widened.

“Come now, Harry, I won’t harm you.”

“Well then, I still don’t see what’s keeping me from telling everyone what you’ve said,” I returned, “It’s a bit careless to talk like that in a courtroom.”

“I’ve said nothing completely damning, Mr. Potter,” Malfoy said, his smile returning to normal proportions, “It must be that rash way of thinking you’re ever so famous for, that is piecing incriminations together.” Lucius stepped back and faced me completely, leaning against his table. I looked at the sleeping Avery, and noticed something. The tip of a wand was protruding from under his arm. Malfoy saw that I’d detected it.

“Crouch’s Imperius was candy floss as compared to Avery’s,” Lucius whispered conspiratorially. I shivered; he wouldn’t dare use that in a bleeding courtroom with the thrice damned Minister of Magic a few meters away.

"Oh don't worry, Mr. Potter, we are quite prepared to take risks. Planting Crouch at Hogwarts had many benefits, I know your skill, and I will not miscalculate your improvisational abilities," He whispered as if reading my mind, "The Dark Lord doesn't tolerate slip ups, and Avery's error was idiotic. I need to correct it by any means. But," He paused, "Things need not be violent." Malfoy was serious. He would fix the problem, namely me. I looked at him, but there was nothing other than determination present on his face. Let it be known, though, that Death Eaters use botox. I let go of my wand and crossed my arms. Malfoy nodded. I shrugged.

"Why would you even want to help me?" I asked, voicing the question that had plagued Headquarters ever since Snape had recovered. Lucius' smile disappeared instantly.

"There are uses for a person such as yourself," the Death Eater said, "Uses that one cannot fulfill from within Azkaban. The Dark Lord is... confused when it comes to you, Harry Potter."

"So, you were ordered to help me, for reasons yet to be known?" I asked. Malfoy furrowed his brows.

"I am going to take it one step at a time, Mr. Potter. First the Minister has set up a trial for Underage Magic Use. You are to say that Avery attacked you first, understand?" He ordered, ignoring my remark. I nodded; I'd planned to do that anyway.

"If Bones isn't cowed by Fudge, I expect her not to be, she will reserve judgment until after the other trial. They will break and then convene Avery v. Potter, at which time I will inform the Wizengamot that Avery has decided to drop any charges." I nodded again, waiting to see the point of all this. Snape had said it would go down this way.

"Fudge will try to fight this, hoping to sway me. If he begins to grovel or cry, I will allow the trial to proceed, but Avery will lose. If worse comes to worse, he will go to Azkaban for assaulting a minor."

"I see," I said, "So what do I do?" Malfoy gave me a ghost of a smile.

“Sit and look innocent, Lord knows you’re much better at it than Thomas.”

“Right,” I said, “One more question, Mr. Malfoy.” He nodded.

“Why did you have to wait until now to drop the charges?” He shrugged.

“I was on vacation.”

“Oh,” I said, “Where?”

“Prague.” I stared at him blankly, what would being on vacation in Prague have to do with my trial in England.

“Oh come now, Potter, you don’t believe the Dark Lord has legions of politically trained, influential, and affluent contacts, do you?”

“No.” Lucius looked at me strangely.

“Was that supposed to be humorous?”

“No.”

“Alright.”

“I’ll just sit then,” I mumbled, taking a seat and leaning back. Malfoy picked his cane up and approached the stairwell that led up to the Minister’s seat. Avery kept his wand pointed at me as more of the Wizengamot began to fill the seats around the room. Lucius returned soon after the member sat in the very back, and prodded Avery. The man snorted loudly. Lucius grunted and jabbed him with the head of his cane. Avery sat up ‘sleepily.’ They made their way over to a bench at the back of the room. Malfoy didn’t so much as glance at me as they passed. I looked up and ahead. A woman had taken the seat on the right of Fudge; she was a pleasant middle-aged sort. Her dark hair was clipped shorter than average and a monocle was set near her left eye. She was probably Madam Bones. At the Minister’s immediate right was a man with a long curling beard, and peyos that would not be out of place on an orthodox Jew. I had no idea who

exactly he was. He seemed to be conversing with the man next to him. Next to the man that the bearded man was talking to, was a man that was familiar to me, Percy Weasley. The third eldest Weasley boy had fallen out with his family and was now pursuing a career in political ass-kissing. It apparently had gotten him a job in law. I waved at him when he looked up from inking his quill. He didn't acknowledge me.

When everyone had gotten settled, the Minister of Magic opened his mouth to begin the hearing, but halted when the rear entrance was opened. I didn't turn to look; I knew from the expression on Fudge's face that it was Dumbledore. The Headmaster pulled even with my table. He was wearing orange robes, with white clouds drifting about lazily on the fabric. His beard was decidedly shorter than it was in June, now just reaching his chest. There was no wizard's hat 'pon his head and his wispy grey hair was cut shorter as well. He didn't look at me, but kept facing Fudge, Bones, and the other man. The Minister struggled to keep a frown off of his face, but the other two weren't angry, if anything they looked ashamed.

"Right, let's get on with it, then," Fudge said after he had calmed himself down, "Now beginning the hearing for Underage Magic use by Harry James Potter of Number 4 Privet Drive, Little Whinging, Surrey, U.K." He was passed a slip of paper from the lady that I'd taken to be Ms. Bones. He looked it over and cleared his throat.

"All seats are within the chamber are filled, and the Minister of Magic, Cornelius Oswald Fudge is acting as Interim Supreme Mugwump of the Wizengamot. Interrogators present are, Cornelius Oswald Fudge, Amelia Susan Bones, and Jerry. Is Mr. H.J. Potter present?"

"Yes," Dumbledore answered before I could reply. Fudge nodded, before rubbing his chin(s).

"And you are?"

"Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore, here for Mr. Potter's defense."

"Did Mr. H.J Potter appoint you to this position," Fudge inquired.

"Yes," Dumbledore answered.

"I'm afraid we'll need Mr. H.J. Potter to confirm this himself," the bearded man, Jerry, said, "Mr. Potter?"

"Nope, I did not," I answered, "uh, Mr. Jerry." I had no idea what Dumbledore was going to do, I had no earthly clue whether or not I could trust that things would go smoothly if I let him take over. Even worse, I'm quite sure Avery had his wand trained on my back. I didn't want to upset the Death Eaters. If they pulled the Imperious off, and I couldn't fight back, I'd be screwed. They'd have ticket into Hogwarts and Headquarters, not to mention whatever they could make me do here.

"You did not?" Jerry asked, eyebrows raised.

"I haven't seen him all summer," I said, "I couldn't have appointed him anything."

"Well," Bones broke in, "Albus, you will have to take a seat."

"May I have a word with Mr. Potter, briefly?" the Headmaster asked. Fudge said no, as did Bones, but Jerry agreed.

"Go ahead," Madam Bones said after a whispered conversation with Fudge and Jerry, "Two minutes, starting now." Dumbledore nodded and turned to me. I looked up, but he didn't look me in the eyes.

"Harry," he began, "Do you have a plan of action?" I nodded. Malfoy's plan was pretty straightforward.

"I see, well, I was only trying to help." I shrugged.

"I can help myself when it comes down to it, Professor," I said quietly, "I appreciate the help you given me so far, but I can handle it on my own. They don't know the half of what I've done and will do." The old man took a step back and looked at me over his half-moon spectacles, which I noted were cracked. I looked at his face, the wrinkles were more pronounced and he had dark bags under his

eyes. I suppose he had been busy, at least the Order hadn't lied about that much. He seemed tense, really tense. He looked up at the ceiling for a moment, before looking at my eyes.

"Tell me, Harry, do you know the story of Icarus and Daedalus?"

"Yes," I answered simply. He looked as if he was searching for something.

"Time," Madam Bones called out, "Albus." The Headmaster looked at me once more, suddenly looking many, many years younger.

"Do not fall, Harry Potter."

AN: So, yeah. Review. Tell me if you want the actual trial part or not. Else I'm skipping to after the trial.

Godspeed,

Frack

Chapter XI: This River

“... and that is why, Harry, I do not blame Cornelius for what he has done,” the Headmaster finished as we turned onto Grimmauld Place. I glanced at the old man in his bright orange robes; they were not suited for our current surroundings. He didn’t seem too bothered, though. After finishing his monologue, the Headmaster began to hum. I turned away. Dumbledore had not looked me in the eye at all, barring the one time from when my trial had begun. He hadn’t let me start an actual conversation with him, either. I was a bit annoyed, just a bit. I spit out the hard candy he had given me. It shattered upon hitting the sidewalk. I looked up at him once more.

“Professor, do you think it’s smart to simply walk to Headquarters,” I asked. The man stopped his humming.

“What headquarters, Mr. Potter? I am simply taking you to stay with a friend,” he replied. He had turned his head but his eyes were upon my forehead. I nodded and kicked at a root that had found its way above ground.

“Quite correct, Professor.” He returned to his humming. I looked around at the depressing locale and returned my gaze to the less depressing sidewalk, trying to think un-depressing thoughts. I smiled a little. The trial had gone smoothly, for me anyway; Avery had to serve three weeks in Azkaban for assaulting a minor. I didn’t pity the man. He had put himself in that position, pickin’ on children. Thomas Avery was a bully. After the trial, Dumbledore spoke briefly to Fudge about Voldemort, but came away unsuccessful. The Minister wouldn’t change his mindset. To Fudge, the Dark Lord was dead and Britain was safe. Dumbledore figured that Fudge was only doing what he was to protect England. My smile faded. I’m quite sure that Fudge is the most incapable politician I’d ever met. He didn’t even know that Malfoy was playing him. The idiot hadn’t even taken the time to look at Rita Skeeter’s article, assuming that it discredited me. Malfoy left without a word to me or Fudge, simply exiting the moment the trial had concluded. The Minister had looked somewhat upset.

After I had tried to open the door in the Department of Mysteries, which happened to be locked, the Headmaster ushered me up to Mr.

Weasley's office. When we had reached the small cluttered Misuse of Muggle Artifacts office, Mr. Weasley was nowhere to be found. His colleague told us that he was off on a call, something about regurgitating toilets. Dumbledore had offered to ride the Underground and return me to Number Twelve. So here were we, a disgruntled teenager and a Merlin-esque old man, traipsing through London. To be honest, I think he enjoyed the looks he earned from the muggles.

We reached the house in a few minutes. I opened the gate and stepped through, Dumbledore followed. We crossed the courtyard and I fished out my keys from within my pocket. I climbed the stairs and approached the door. I'd scarcely slid the key into its hole, when Dumbledore bid me farewell. I turned so quickly that my neck cricked. He waved once, and apparated away. How abrupt. I pulled the key out of the lock and flung the entire ring towards where Dumbledore last stood, snarling.

I cursed; I'd been meaning to question him more. There wasn't much I could ask him on the Underground, and there was even less he could reply properly to, when he chose to reply at all. I leant against the door and stared at the twinkling set of keys. I cursed again, louder, that was probably why he insisted on taking the muggle way. Bastard. Growling such profanities, I went to retrieve my keys, returned to the door, viciously shoved the correct key into the lock and pushed the door open. I stepped into the house, returned my keys to my pocket, and closed the door behind me. I dropped my voice to a whisper; I didn't want to wake Mrs. Black. It was her nap time. Now muttering the profanities, I started forward, but paused.

The lamps were off.

Strange, by now everyone would be up and Order members would be coming and going like drunkards to an alehouse. I pulled out my wand, turned the gas on, stood on my tip-toes and lit one of the lamps. Muttering the phrase Sirius had taught me, I shut off the gas. The lamps lining the hall all burst into light, singeing the glass that encased them. I twisted my mouth, too much force.

Making my way down the narrow hall, I heard nothing like the usual bustle of activity that came from the kitchen on normal mornings. I halted inches from the door.

Crack.

I stepped away from the door and the red-headed teen that had appeared in front of me, and in so doing ran into the other twin that had appeared behind me. He steadied himself. I stood straight and looked ahead.

“What ho! There’s a civilian, brother,” Fred said. I supposed it to be Fred, for he had a large ‘F’ on his shirt.

“It’s Harry!” George exclaimed. I greeted them awkwardly, for one was behind me and the other was in front. George maneuvered his way around me and stood next to his brother. My left eyebrow quirked up, maybe I was wrong about their names. ‘Fred’s’ shirt said ‘F,’ but ‘George’s’ shirt said ‘U.’ Looking at the both of them together, I snickered, they read from left to right ‘F–U.’

“So, Harry,” ‘F’ said, “How did it go?”

“Well, if it had gone afoul, would I be here, Fred?” I replied. He shook his head, smiling. So it was Fred. He extended his hand to his brother.

“True,” he answered. “Well, that’s ten sickles for me, George.” The other twin grumbled something about holes in his pocket, as he shelled out seven silver coins.

“ ‘s all I’ve got,” he said. I stared at the exchange.

“You placed bets on my trial?” I asked. Fred tucked the silver into his pants.

“Somebody had to.”

“Don’t worry, mate, no one else did,” George said ruefully. “I do expect they know how to conserve their coinage.” I stared at the pair

for another few seconds before shaking my head. I shouldn't have been surprised.

"Right," I said at last. "It's past lunch and I'm starving." I made for the door.

"Hold your horses, mate" Fred cautioned stepping fully in front of the door, "Dung showed up earlier, said he had to tell Moody something, after which we were removed from the kitchen by Mum. I doubt you're going to get in."

"Meeting?" I asked. Fred's mouth twisted and he said nothing.

"Unofficial, but it's something important, I expect. I doubt we're going to find out what, though" George answered for him.

"What's Dung's job, maybe we can figure out what it likely is," I offered leaning against the wall. News is news, and Order news is usually more informative than the usual rubbish I've been getting. Fred leant against the door and pressed his ear to it.

"Still soundproofed, it's like they don't trust us or something," he said. George shrugged.

"I think after they caught us the first three times, Mum wizened up," he said. Fred nodded in agreement.

"Dung. Job. Then food for Harry," I interjected.

"No need to snap, Harry," George said. Fred moved his ear from the door and put his back against it.

"Well, Dung's a smuggler most days, and he's a guard for something a couple days out of the week, from what we've gathered. Other than that, he's usually just homeless," he said.

"So, what's he been smuggling for the Order?" I asked. The twins giggled, it was quite the sight. Once they'd calmed down Fred answered me.

“He’s been doing the smuggling for us more than anything, Harry. Where do you think we get all those ingredients? I doubt Dumbledore would want him to steal anything. He’s in the Order to relay what the other smugglers and blackguards of the magical world are up to. We’re lucky he’s so loyal to Dumbledore, or else this place would have been cleaned out long ago, and not hygienically either.” I blinked. We’ve been working with trafficked goods?

“Well,” I replied, “That tells me nothing. What’s he been guarding, then?”

“Hey, that was good information! D’you know how long it took us to get that?” They chorused. I shook my head.

“No, not a bit. We’re still out here, while they are in there, chatting away on this pretty little war we’ve got in the works.”

“I think he gets cranky when he’s hungry, Fred,” George muttered. Fred was about to reply, when the kitchen door opened and he fell in. George snickered.

“Oh, hey there Ms. Vance,” Fred said from his place on the ground, “Red is a wonderful color on you.”

Ms. Vance shrieked at the teen between her legs.

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Over the next few days I could not help but realize that the new term was fast approaching. Everyone seemed thoroughly enthused for the return to Hogwarts, everyone but my godfather, Sirius Black. Hell, even the family’s creepy house elf, Kreacher, was overjoyed. The pitiful creature, pun intended, had begun to sing whenever he saw one of the Weasley’s packing up. This afternoon, the day before the end of break, I was calmly sorting through the various pamphlets I’d picked up from Orion, half of which I hadn’t read, when Ron hauled himself up to my room. I paused in my sorting and stared at the teen, who was breathing rather hard. He caught his breath and approached me. Dropping himself on my bed he handed me a sandwich and an envelope that was addressed to me.

“Why did you have to stay all the way up here, Harry?” He asked. “I finished my sandwich on the way up alone.”

“You know, Ron, that’s not saying much,” I said handing him a piece of poetry by Quentin Makepeace. “You’ve got some jam on your cheek, wipe.” He grinned.

“Well, I tried to ration it as best I could,” he said, wiping his face on his sleeve and looking over the poem.

“What is this?”

“Poetry, it’s pretty terrible, isn’t it?” I replied looking the envelope and placing my sandwich on my nightstand.

“Yeah—Well, um—yeah it is,” he said distractedly as he continued to read it. I repressed a snort. Sure. I opened the envelope. Inside were two pieces of parchment, the first was the usual, telling me when term would start, the second detailed what texts I’d need for the upcoming year. There were three new ones, Practical Charms by Ebenezer Hasek, The Standard book of Spells, Grade 5, by Miranda Goshawk and Defensive Magical Theory by Wilbert Slinkhard. The sad thing was, I had purchased the first two before my tussle with Avery and left them in Diagon Alley.

“Who do you reckon the Defense professor is going to be, Ron? Maybe someone from the Order of the Phoenix?” Ron didn’t answer. I looked at him, my eyes widened in disbelief. Sitting in his palm was a crimson and gold badge. He looked at me, shocked.

“Harry, I’m a pr-prefect,” he stuttered.

“No fucking way,” I muttered.

“Yeah, look, there’s a letter and everything,” he said, “Wow.” He passed me the letter and badge.

“Sweet Magdalene,” I muttered, looking at the letter. “You are.”

Crack.

"That is not right," George gasped as he appeared, Fred agreed.

"How—Where—How did you—," Ron attempted to say. They probably heard from through the wall. The twins looked at me.

"How did he beat you out for the position? Dumbledore loves you," Fred said, "You even won the Tournament for Hogwarts!" I shrugged. I was confused. I had forgotten about the whole prefect thing, but if I had remembered... If I had remembered, I would have expected the badge to be mine. I had done so many things to save that damned school, but I wasn't prefect. Sure Ron and Hermione had been with me through most of it, when it came down to it, I had been alone. I had killed Quirrell, slain a Basilisk, driven off a pack of Dementors, and faced Voldemort (even if he hadn't been at full strength). I held up the badge and examined it. A large gold 'P' was superimposed on the scarlet Gryffindor lion. It looked exactly like the one Percy Weasley had been sporting during my First Year.

"I knew it!" A voice shrieked. "Congratulations, Harry!" All of our heads turned to the door. Hermione stepped through, her own prefect badge pinned to her chest. She waved her letter at me. I tossed the badge back to Ron, who caught it against his chest.

"It's not mine, Ron's prefect," I said calmly. Her jaw dropped.

"Ron?" Hermione asked. "What? Are you positive?" Ron stood up.

"Hey, it's addressed to me," He said, brandishing his prefect letter. Her face reddened.

"Well, Ron, er—that's great. Good job!"

"Yeah," Ron said, his face falling, "Unexpected, I know." He sat down and reached for my sandwich. I let him have it. Poor bloke, he wouldn't be in this situation if Dumbledore had given me the prefectship. I glanced Hermione, she suddenly seemed terribly out of place.

I suppose she had been hoping to resolve our problems with the prefect deal. That's too bad.

"Speaking of unexpected," George began. "How did you know that we were here, Hermione?" She glanced at Ron.

"I, um, followed the trail of crumbs." Ron stopped eating.

"Yes, well I'd better take your letters down to Mrs. Weasley," Hermione said. "She's going to pick us up our books." She accepted Ron's pair of letters, as well as mine and the twins'. Nodding to herself she bustled out of the room. The twins gave Ron one last look before disappearing with a muted crack! Ron fidgeted.

"Harry—"

"Congratulations, Ron," I said, cutting him off. "I need to finish packing up, you should go tell your Mum the news."

"Alright," he said quietly. "I didn't ask for this, though, Harry. I didn't expect it. We're still friends right?" I looked up at him. I wanted to say no, I felt like I should have, but I didn't. Ron didn't ask to be made prefect. I offered him a small grin.

"For now."

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I had finished packing by four o'clock. From four to six I laid on my side and watched Feste wrestle with one of my socks. My mind was hardly on refereeing the fight. At seven o'clock, however, my clip-on wooden earring began to vibrate, and soon consistent sounds were being translated. Mrs. Weasley was calling everyone down. I stood and knocked on the left wall of my room. A minute later, the twins popped in and we were off.

Mrs. Weasley had returned from shopping. On the kitchen table were various sets of parcels with our names written on them. Ron, Hermione, Ginny, Fred, George, and I lined up as she began to hand

them out. Ron received a long package and let out a feminine yelp. It was apparently a broom.

“Don’t unwrap it now,” his mother told him. “I’ve invited people for dinner; I want you all downstairs in a few minutes.” He nodded his head absently and stared longingly at the package as if it were a sausage rather than a hunk of wood. Mrs. Weasley went back to handing out parcels, and when she got to me, she handed me a larger pile of books and my money as well. I raised my eyebrow.

“The strangest thing happened, Harry,” she said. “The cashier at Flourish and Blots said he had your books, already. I hope you don’t mind, but I refilled your potions supplies and bought you a little something extra as well, dear.”

“Thank you, Mrs. Weasley,” I said, “I appreciate it.” She flashed a smile at me before moving off to Ginny. I looked down at the wrapped books. The handwriting on them was not Mrs. Weasley’s. She must have asked the cashier to wrap them up for her. There was another wrapped object; I took it to be a potion’s kit. Mrs. Weasley finished handing out the supplies a moment later and rushed us all up to get ready for dinner.

“I want all of you downstairs and ready in five minutes!” She yelled. I was wearing a striped t-shirt and jeans, I figured I was fine. I followed Ron up to the floor he was on and ducked into the bathroom to wash my face and hands. Afterward, I peeked into his room and saw him rubbing his hands along his broom.

“So... What model is that?” I asked, entering the room. Ron jumped.

“Oh, er—It’s a Cleansweep Eleven,” He said showing it to me. “Mum asked me what I wanted for making prefect. I figured since she said she was going to get me a new broom for Christmas this year, I’d ask for a better one.” I offered him a muted smile, I was happy that he had received something new, but the prefect thing still bothered me. Ron Weasley, prefect. It sounded weird. He wrapped his broom up and we went down to the kitchen.

Dinner was to be held in the basement it seemed, because when Ron and I reached the kitchen, it was deserted. I crossed to where the basement door stood ajar and descended. Ron followed mutely.

I had to stop myself from sneering when I saw what the Weasley matriarch had hung over the huge dinner table. It was a banner that read, "CONGRATULATIONS RON AND HERMIONE –NEW GRYFFINDOR PREFECTS." I smiled at her and Ginny as they set drinks out along the table, and scanned the room. Sirius sat in a corner with a party hat on and a turkey leg in one hand, nibbling at it. I left Ron as he joined Hermione and Ginny and made my way over to my godfather. He looked up at me, a weak smile plastered on his face.

"Hey Harry."

"Hey, Sirius. What's got you down?" I asked. He picked up a bottle wrapped in a brown paper bag and took a pull from it.

"Down? I'm fine, my boy. Absolutely splendid," he said leaning back in his chair and looking at me.

"Yeah?" I said disbelievingly. I stared at the bottle.

"I'm fucking wonderful, Harry. Best day of my life, I swear it," he muttered, ripping a piece of flesh from the large drumstick.

"Sarcasm, doesn't suit you," Lupin called as he approached. I turned my head and looked at him.

"Hello Harry," he greeted. "G'Morning Padfoot."

"It's night, you mangy wolf," Sirius grumbled. Lupin smiled and looked at me.

"At least he's not completely drunk." Lupin grabbed the bottle quickly and pulled it out of the paper bag. It was muggle whiskey.

"Where'd you get this?" Lupin asked, sniffing the alcohol.

“Dung,” Sirius replied, reaching for the bottle. “Give it back.”

“Why?”

“So I can enjoy this party, you idiot!”

Just then, Mrs. Weasley approached us, carrying three bottles of what looked to be butterbeer. She was followed by Tonks, whose hair was a ‘normal’ shade of brown today. Tonks was being followed by Ginny, whose hair was, as expected, ginger. I accepted a bottle and took the top off on the corner of Sirius’ chair. Mrs. Weasley looked at Remus, who was still holding the whiskey, and didn’t give him a butterbeer. She didn’t know what the bottle held, in all likelihood. Sirius reluctantly took one butterbeer, but didn’t open it. She handed Ginny, who had come to stand near me, the last bottle. Ginny then handed it to me. I put it in my pocket.

“Well,” Mrs. Weasley began, “get ready, I think Arthur’s about to propose a toast!” True to her word Mr. Weasley had gotten over the joy of another son becoming prefect and offered a toast to Hermione and Ron, the new Gryffindor prefects. Mrs. Weasley hurried over and enveloped her son in another hug. She was happier than I’d seen the entire summer. I looked away.

Someone laid their hand on my shoulder. I glanced up, it was Tonks.

“I wasn’t prefect either, Harry,” she said. “Snape said I was a disgrace to the House, being as noisy and clumsy as I am.” I brushed her hand off of me.

“I suppose I have caused a lot of trouble,” I told her. “I don’t know, I feel strange, like I should have been picked.” Remus walked stood on my other side and offered me a small smile.

“You know, Harry, I get that feeling a lot.” I grinned. Ain’t, no way to feel better about your own problems like laughing at another’s. Remus could find less job offers than he could hold the actual job. Sirius giggled from behind us.

“Did you actually think, you being who you are, that you’d be prefect?” The three of us spun and looked at him. He set his bottle on the ground and looked at me.

“Come now, Harry, your Dad wasn’t prefect,” he said. He leaned back. “Actually, we ran detention better than those pricks.” I didn’t feel much better.

“What about my Mum?” I asked. Sirius rubbed his chin.

“I didn’t pay much mind to Lily until James was dating her,” he said. “I was much too busy trying to find someone else for him.” Lupin laughed a genuine laugh. The first I’d heard from him since Third Year.

“It’s too bad that you’d dated almost every one of them, beforehand though,” he said. “No, Harry, your mother was a prefect. James would go out of his way to anger her enough to put him in detention.” I smiled longingly, I missed them. I didn’t know what exactly I missed, but I missed it all the same.

“Oh, cheer up, Harry,” Tonks said wrapping her arm around me. “The whole prefect thing is a bit of a turnoff to the gels, they’re too uptight. Shoot for Quidditch Captain or Head Boy. That’s where the respect is.” Sirius frowned.

“Hey, why’d the music stop?”

Lupin looked at my godfather, puzzled. Sighing, he picked up the whiskey bottle and pulled it out of the bag. It was empty.

“You are something else, Sirius,” the werewolf muttered. “Tonks go get a bucket. He’s about to throw up.” Tonks released me and hurried off. I stepped away from Sirius.

“How d’you know he’s about to vomit?” Lupin grinned.

“I’ve known the man long enough to know his drinking habits.” No sooner than Tonks returned did Sirius double over and expel the contents of his stomach into the bucket.

"That's gross," she said. Sirius shrugged and nudged the bucket away, reaching for Tonks' butterbeer.

"Thanks a bunch, Nymphadora," he slurred and downed her drink. "Strange, I taste the butter, but not the beer, why is that?"

"There's no alcohol," I said. He stared at the bottle in wonder.

"Then why's it called beer?" I shrugged.

"To fool us into thinking there is alcohol in it."

"Ah," he said. "Sure fooled me." I chuckled.

"What's going on over here—oh, what's that smell!" The voice of a certain bossy, bushy-haired prefect called, as she and Ginny approached. I do admit, we did look suspicious standing here, backs facing the rest of the party. Sirius peeked out.

"We are having a party all on our own, with music, girls, well a girl, a frowny clown, wolves and butter, sans the beer." Hermione's eyes widened.

"He's drunk!"

"Quite," Sirius confirmed. Hermione rushed off, leaving Ginny with us.

"Now we've got two girls," I told Sirius. He squinted at Ginny.

"One and a half." Tonks giggled. Ginny's cheeks flushed. A moment later, Hermione returned along with Mrs. Weasley. She took one whiff of the air around us and pointed at Sirius.

"Upstairs, shower and bed, now," she barked at him. Her good mood only slightly dampened. Sirius pouted.

"No."

"Alright then," she said, and left. Hermione stood, shocked.

“How could she just...”

“Oh take it easy, bossy boots,” Tonks said. “This is the most fun we’ve all had in ages.” Hermione looked at the drunken Sirius one more time.

“Oh, very well.” Lupin moved over and allowed Hermione to crowd around Sirius as well.

“This is very odd, you know,” The new prefect told him. Remus shrugged. Suddenly, Sirius sniffed the air and stood up.

“Dung!” he yelled waving his arms. A tallish man at the other end of the room looked over at us. Seeing Sirius wave, he approached.

“Oh no,” Hermione moaned. “He smells even worse than Sirius.”

“Shut it,” I growled at her. “Keep it up and I’ll make him hug you.” Hermione huffed at my tone. Mundungus Fletcher soon reached us. Sirius pushed through us and walked with the man to an empty corner of the room. We watched the exchange quietly. After a few moments of Sirius talking to him, Dung reached into his bulging trench coat. Tonks leaned against me.

“A sickle say’s he’s buying more whiskey,” she whispered into my ear. I nodded absently, and choked when I saw Sirius return with a bottle in either hand.

“Look mates,” he grinned as he took his seat, “I got more!” Dung wandered off and began talking to the twins. I took a bottle from Sirius.

“Does that man have an entire warehouse in that coat?” I asked. Remus shrugged.

“Hey, give me that,” Tonks said. “You’re not of age.”

“And you are?” I asked. Sirius giggled.

"Yes, I am," Tonks huffed, opening the bottle. She took a sip and gave me the bottle.

"That's enough for me," she said. I blinked.

"That's it?" I questioned. She blushed. I sniffed at the open bottle. It smelled fine. Lupin stretched his hand out and took the bottle away.

"Idiots," said. "Leave the idiocy to the king." He handed the bottle back to Sirius. Tonks was about to protest, but her watch buzzed. She looked down at her timepiece and blushed.

"I've got to get going," she announced. I cocked an eyebrow.

"Why, you live upstairs." I said. She made a sound. Ginny looked at her as well.

"Oh, fine," Tonks said, "I've got to get to bed. I have to go to work tomorrow."

"It's," I began, lifting her arm, "eight-forty-five. When do you have to be there?" She blushed harder.

"Nine, but I need to make sure I'm on time and prepared!"

"For what, are you going to war?"

"You're a dick, you know."

"Why thank you," I grinned. She folded her arms across her chest. I did the same.

"I'll wake you up, Tonks," Ginny offered from beside me. "You can stay longer."

"Thanks, Ginny, but I've got it all planned out," Tonks said. "Scrimgeour won't get me this time."

"Do what you like," I said. "And here was I thinking about what a stick in the mud Hermione was." Tonks stuck her tongue out at me.

"You miss me already," she said. I snorted, but followed her as she made her way to across the room. I stopped at the table and grabbed another butterbeer. Looking around, I noticed that Mrs. Weasley was nowhere to be seen. Ron had gotten his broom sometime before and was showing it off to Order members and his brothers. Mr. Weasley was chatting with Kingsley. A few people were sitting and eating here and there, including the one chap that had patched up Snape, and a man I thought to be Sturgis Podmore or something like that. I took a pull from my drink and walked towards the stairs. A gnarled hand shot out and grabbed my arm before I could start up them. Mad-Eye Moody was sitting with his back to the wall, and with his cloak still on, he was pretty much camouflaged.

"C'mere Potter, I've got something you might fancy a look at," he said. In his other hand he held a photograph that looked to be very old. He held it out to me.

"I found this 'un last night when I was looking for my combat boots," he continued. "This is the original Order of the Phoenix." I looked at the man. He wasn't nearly as gruff with me as he had been before. I took the picture. Staring back up at me was a group of people dressed for various walks of life. Some were dressed finely, others in tattered robes and stoles.

"There I am, if you couldn't tell," Moody said. "My nose was still on straight." I looked at the younger Moody, his hair was grey, but not nearly as unkempt as it was now. His face seemed content, if not happy, and his nose was indeed intact. I made an agreeing sound.

"That's Albus and his brother Aberforth next to him," Moody continued. I looked at Aberforth. He looked a lot like the Headmaster, but younger in the face. They both seemed to share the love for unusual clothing, for the Professor was wearing a red striped sweater on top of his robes and Aberforth had socks on his hands. I couldn't hold back a chuckle. Moody stopped his explanation.

"Yeah, they're a funny lot," he said, "but brilliant, the both of them." From there Mad-Eye showed me the rest of the Order, most of who were dead. My stomach clenched, when he showed me Neville

Longbottom's parents. So, the bottom of my stomach dropped out when Moody pointed out my parents and Sirius sitting with Wormtail. My fists clenched. The little rat was smiling and waving along with the people he had betrayed. Moody smiled at me.

"There, I knew you'd like to see your parents." He thought he'd made me happy. I forced a smile onto my face and excused myself, saying that I needed to use the restroom. I made my way upstairs and through the kitchen dropping my half-empty bottle into the sink. It broke.

I continued walking. I climbed the stairs intending to make the entire journey up to my room. Half-way up to the first landing, I began to hear noises. Sobbing, someone was sobbing. Drawing my wand, I hurried up the stairs to see what the matter was. I stumbled onto the first landing, and then opened the door to the drawing room, wand raised.

Against the wall Mrs. Weasley was cowering, her entire form wracked by sobs. On the floor in front of me lay Ron, skin pale, clearly dead. My heart skipped a beat. Ron was downstairs... Mrs. Weasley extended her arm and incanted shakily, "R-ri-riddikulus!" The body vanished and was replaced by Bill Weasley, his hair loose, dead the same as Ron. It was a boggart. She sobbed the spell at it again. Bill was replaced by Percy, who was replaced by me, who in turn was replaced by Mr. Weasley. I stepped in front of and raised my wand. Looking at Mr. Weasley, dead, I said the spell firmly.

"Riddikulus."

Mr. Weasley's body disappeared. Instead, standing in front of me was a man, tall, slightly skinny. His skin was tanned and scarred. His hair was dark and hung to his shoulders, scruffy hair grew on his face. His eyes, his eyes were bloodshot, his irises dark green. And on his forehead was a jagged lightning bolt scar. The man's mouth was pressed into a frown. It was me. I stood agape and the sad figure before me. The older Harry Potter looked at me. Our eyes met, and a sense of despair set over me. I couldn't move. The eyes of the man before me were empty. There was no life behind them. He raised his arm; his fist was bloody and tightly closed. I tried to raise my wand,

but my body did not respond. I dimly heard someone call my name as the older me opened his outstretched hand and three badges dropped to the ground, two gold and red, one blue.

“HARRY,” a voice screamed. I turned, as Remus pushed me from in front of the boggart and dispelled it with a flick of his own wand. It turned into the full moon after which, Remus flicked his wand again and the boggart disappeared with in a puff of smoke.

I scrambled up and hurried out of the room, but Mad-Eye was standing there, his magical eye spinning. I pushed past him and continued up the stairs as my scar seared with pain.

AN: Next Chapter: The Long Haul.

I've had 4k of it done for about two month's, some of you might know that already. I have to edit it a bit and add the ending, expect an update by the end of this week.

Chapter XII: The Long Haul

The Hogwarts Express wasn't nearly as lively half an hour before departure. Most compartments were empty or nearly empty, with one or two people occupying the four to six capacity boxes. There were more families and parties arriving, but none of their faces belonged to anyone I cared to greet or cared enough to fake a greeting to. After I had set my belongings down in a compartment and bid a farewell to Ron the prefect, I sat down. Then I pondered. The ending of the summer had come, and still I longed for more. I had hardly begun planning for the new year. The pondering continued as Ginny slid the door open and sat down across from me.

"Hi, Harry," she said after a moment. I shifted my gaze from her pink and black striped shirt to her face. Her cheeks flushed slightly. She must've thought I was checking her out or something.

"Salutations, Piglet," I responded and returned to my pondering, staring at her midsection blankly. The girl shifted, before rummaging in her shoulder bag for something more interesting to do than watching me brood. I half agreed with her. I imagine the look on my face wasn't too inspiring or cheerful. After I had pondered my original thought to death, I turned my thoughts towards another nagging question. Why was my watch on my left hand today? I could have sworn I'd put it on my right hand as I usually did. The morning had been hectic, I could have overlooked it, but I rather doubt it. My mouth twisted up at one side as I stared at the worn digital timepiece.

"H-hello, Harry," a new voice greeted, "can I sit here?" I grunted and looked towards the door. It was Neville Longbottom. I looked him over. The boy had grown a bit more than I had, and was beginning to lose some of his puppy fat. It made his face look much leaner, still round, but thinner almost. His hair had grown also, now reaching his cheeks. He was already wearing his school robes, and I noted that they looked new. I nodded at him silently and glanced back at my watch. Neville greeted Ginny a bit more enthusiastically, without a stutter, and sat down next to me. I glanced at him. He'd enjoyed their date at the Yule Ball last year immensely, if I remember correctly. Maybe he liked her. He looked back at me hesitantly. I blinked at him and returned my thoughts to my watch's odd placement, dimly noticing

him produce a potted plant from somewhere on his person. I put my watch back where it belonged.

“Mimbulus Mimbletonia,” he told Ginny. “My Uncle got it for me when he went to Assyria this summer.” I listened to him drone on about his pudgy grey cactus, for that was what it looked like, but didn’t give comment. Ginny responded politely and accordingly, although I could tell that she was uninterested. After hearing about its watering schedule I realized something.

“Oh bother,” I grumbled, rising.

“What?” Ginny asked quickly, attempting to change the subject of her conversation. I tugged at my shirt and made for the door.

“I need to take a leak.” I stepped outside and then realized that I didn’t exactly know where the restroom aboard the Express was. I stuck my head back inside the booth.

“Hey, where’s the bathroom?” Ginny stood up before Neville could reply.

“Do you want me to show you?” I raised an eyebrow. She must’ve really hated that cactus.

“Not really... Directions will do,” I responded. The idea of Ginny leading me to the restroom disturbed me. Thankfully, Neville knew where it was.

“It’s just down the hall, Harry,” he said. “The walls are marked.”

“Many thanks, mate,” I told him as I slid the door shut and hurried off.

The Hogwarts Express was a nice train, I realized. Nice and clean, I liked clean trains. The walls were light shade of red, and the windows had nice drapery, the floor was carpeted. I sped down the halls peering at the directional signs that were on the wall. I hadn’t too far to go. I reached an exit, (or entrance, if you were outside) and immediately on my right was a pair of doors. One had a square figure

on it, the other, a figure with a triangular dress. I opened the 'male' door and entered.

After I had concluded my business, I exited the surprisingly roomy bathroom and attempted to make my way back to the compartment, so that I could deliberate upon life some more. Not five seconds after I exited, however, my feet were knocked out from under me by someone entering the train. Now, I wasn't so sure why they put an entrance here. Instinctively, I grabbed out at the person in front of me, but only clutched their shirt and came away with a handful of buttons. I landed on my bottom and hit my head against the bathroom door painfully.

"Oh bother!" I muttered, holding my head with one hand and gripping the buttons with the other. I stared up at the person that had knocked me over and—sweet Magdalene, those were knockers. I shook my head, trying to clear my thoughts. I failed. They weren't that large, but were of a nice medium size. A good handful I supposed, as I held my hand in front of my face, palm up.

It might have taken the girl standing above me a few more seconds to realize that she was exposed if I wasn't weighing her tits in my mind. As it was, though, my viewing was cut short as she drew her shirt together, covering the black bra and alabaster skin beneath. I frowned. The girl gasped at me and let go of her trunk, which looked to be quite heavy. That was probably the reason she knocked me over. I stood up, rubbing my head, and looked at her; she seemed to be the same height as me, which was a bit disappointing. She'd notice if I stared at her chest. Her hair was a dark brown, not nearly black, but dark. Her eyes were a shade of blue that reminded me of denim and her sharp eyebrows were knitted together.

"You're Harry Potter," she said, her eyebrows straightening out. Strange thing to say. I smiled slightly, wondering if I had brushed my teeth properly this morning. She was the first girl to flash me, intentionally or not. I wanted to make a good impression.

"Fortunately, or unfortunately, depending on the day, I am," I replied, trying to smile handsomely. She offered me her hand, allowing a bit

of skin to show where I'd torn her shirt open. I kept my eyes on her face, although I was sorely tempted to look further.

"My name's Daphne," she said, "Daphne Greengrass." Keeping my eyes on her face I reached for her hand, but (I suppose it was subconscious) laid my hand on her chest instead. I shied away as her brows creased again and held my hands up.

"Sorry, sorry!"

"You better be," she said. "Tch, you didn't even get me chocolates or flowers or anything." I lowered my hands and stared at her. She wasn't mad? Or rather, was she mad? The look I gave her probably let her know my thoughts, for she responded accordingly.

"What, you want me strangle you?" she asked, tilting her head. I shook my head and lowered my hands.

"I'm just joking, I am going to strangle you," she said as I relaxed. Uh huh, mad. I took a step back and reached into my pocket. As my hand closed around the wood of my wand, Daphne snickered.

"You are jumpy," she grinned. "Calm down, I was teasing." It was now my turn to squint at her. I drew my wand. A small child attempted to enter the train.

"Who says I'm jumpy?" I asked. The girl hauled her luggage in all the way and leaned back against the wall as a small tow-headed child wearing a freshly pressed uniform and pulling along a trunk that was bigger than he was, clunked onto the train. He looked at each of us timidly before facing me.

"Excuse me," he mumbled. "Where am I supposed to go?" He looked afraid and amazed all at the same time. I don't blame him, I was the same way. Hell, I still am the same way.

"Where ever you want to," I replied, uncreasing my face. "Welcome aboard the Hogwarts Express, your ticket to the where the magic happens. Find a compartment, make some friends, have a good time.

Just don't buy the Blood Pops, real blood you know." I offered him a smile. He looked startled at the idea of Blood Pops. He stumbled over his thanks and headed off down the hall peering into each box as he went. I looked at Daphne, who had a slight frown on her face.

"What?" I asked. She huffed.

"Why didn't he ask me for help?"

"He's a small boy, he looks up to older boys. Thinks I'm cooler."

"Not with that face you had plastered on," she snorted. "Besides you sounded like Head- Boy-in-training." I gave her a cheeky smile before continuing my explanation.

"There's also the fact that you have your blouse ripped, and were postured like you didn't particularly care for his presence, and you say I looked strange," I replied. "Oh, and he's muggleborn, else he would have thought my attire peculiar and would have known about the candy." I pointed to the Sex Pistols t-shirt I was wearing along with my jeans and moccasins.

"Oh," she mumbled, thinking. I shrugged and waved my wand about, my confidence growing. I am an perceptive bastard. My grammar's great as well.

"Do you want me to fix your," I gestured towards her blouse. She looked down at her chest and then back at me questioningly. I opened my left hand, showing her the buttons, and gestured again with my wand.

"Oh, all right," she said after a moment, a slight smile touching her lips. I raised my arm and held the buttons up as she moved her hands to give me room. Holding the tip of the wand riskily close to her barely clothed breasts, I began the spell.

"Reparo," I muttered, stepping closer to her and moving my wand up along the shirt, watching as the buttons reattached themselves properly. It was true that I was scrutinizing more than necessary, though. I was nearly done when I heard someone coming down our

way. I looked up hoping it wasn't Hermione or Ron. Luckily for me, hurrying towards us was a smaller person, female, with chin length dark hair, tightly fitting blue robes and a leather messenger bag slung over her shoulder. She looked to be about Ginny's age, if not younger. The girl stopped a few feet away from us and looked from Daphne to me repeatedly. She drew her wand and pointed it at me.

"Daph," the girl began slowly. "Is he goin' to rape you?" My eyes widened and I gaped at the little brat.

"How could you—what makes you think that?" I yelled.

"Erm, Harry..." Daphne mumbled. I looked at her red cheeks, and then dropped my eyes to my wand, which was now pressed in between her breasts, parting the shirt and exposing cleavage. Whoops. I turned away quickly.

"Sorry," I coughed, feeling my cheeks grow warm. I withdrew my wand and offered her the two last buttons. The newcomer stared at me.

"Are you her boyfriend?" she asked. I looked down at her in what I hoped was a menacing manner.

"No," I answered gruffly, "Are you?" The girl laughed.

"Hey! Finish the job, idiot," Daphne said. I turned and glared at her, but began the spell anew. Although, I was tempted to leave the blouse exactly the way it was.

"Mum's gonna be mad when she finds out you ripped your new uniform," the smaller girl told Daphne. Daphne made an annoyed sound and leant back against the wall, jostling my hand.

"Shut it, Tori," she huffed, addressing the girl I now took to be her younger sister, "You don't have to tell her every little thing that goes on." Her voice grew angry. I hurried and finished my job.

"Done," I announced, trying to head off an argument. Daphne turned and gave me a brief smile, before turning back toward her sister.

“Is she still here?”

“Nah,” Tori replied, “She said Dad was supposed to be early and hurried off to get lunch started. She gave me your money though.” The girl dug into her bag and produced a green velvet purse that jingled, and tossed it to Daphne. She caught it against her opposite shoulder.

“Right,” Daphne said, cooling down, “Harry Potter, meet my sister, Astoria Greengrass, third year, Slytherin.” The girl sketched a curtsy.

Astoria looked at her sister.

“I’m surprised he’s your friend, Daph. Doesn’t seem like he’d be.” I coughed.

“Hi,” I said, “Nice to meet you.” I waved. Astoria smiled sheepishly at me.

“Heheh, sorry.”

“Not a problem,” I responded, “It is true, though. I don’t usually befriend Slytherins.”

“Who said you were my friend?” Daphne questioned, a wry smile on her face. I tried to frown, it didn’t work.

“You are a mean person,” I said, “but, at least you confirmed you’re in Slytherin as well.” She squinted at me.

“You’re much trickier than I imagined, Harry Potter. Very tricky indeed.”

“You’ve imagined me?” I asked.

“Sure, it’s hard not to. What with gossip about you being in bleedin’ papers more often than the actual news.”

I shrugged and moved as another person boarded the train.

"I enjoy the Prophet, it makes me feel important." Astoria giggled.

I glanced at my watch, it was nearly eleven. Looking out the window that Daphne was leaning against, I saw more people milling about out on the platform. The floo gates were crowded and the other exits were clogging with newcomers as well as those departing.

"Well, we better get going," I told the girls, "You can sit with me if you haven't found a compartment yet."

"Thanks Harry," Tori said, "but I've already got one." I nodded, feeling slightly disappointed. They seemed to be fun people, Daphne's chest aside. We made our way down the train, after I offered to help Daphne with her trunk. It really was quite heavy, making me wonder what kind of muscle the girl was packing. Tori had put her things in a compartment a ways before the one Neville, Ginny and I had occupied, so I left the sisters after meeting Tori's pet rat, Gus.

I made my way to my compartment, greeting a few people along the way. Most, however, seemed nervous to be around me. I figured it was the slander the Prophet had been printing. I'd be lying if I said it didn't bother me, but I wouldn't let it bring me down. Besides, I had an entire year to disprove it. I paused. Actually, I might as well perpetuate the whole crazy thing, at least for a little bit. I took my moccasins off and slid them onto my hands, waving to all that I passed.

Upon arriving back at the compartment I noticed that Neville had taken my seat across from Ginny, who looked even more bored than when I'd left them. As I entered, Neville stopped talking and the littlest Weasley perked up.

"What took you?" She asked as I sat down.

"Nature," I replied. Neville snickered a bit, she blushed. I shrugged and closed my eyes as Neville began talking again. I then stood up and opened my luggage. I'd be bored to death in no time at all if I had to listen to Neville drone on about the usefulness of the Moldovan Imp Root. Moving aside my uniforms and underwear, I plucked out

Makepeace's Swans of Araby and settled down. Neville talked on; unaware that no one cared to listen to him.

We had departed King's Cross and night had closed in on the Express by the time I had finished giggling at the idiot wizard in Makepeace's play. I had changed into my school clothes halfway through it. Ron had stopped by a couple times, but left to patrol the halls. He seemed to take to the role of prefect rather well. At least it seemed as though it wasn't going to his head. It made me think that the Headmaster might actually know what he was doing.

Ginny and Neville were both sleeping, not together may I add, but individually. The latter drooling on himself. I stood, and after stretching, returned Swans of Araby to my trunk and fished out a simple muggle pen, a roll of parchment, and my transfiguration book. Placing the parchment over the book, I sat down and began to draw.

I was putting the finishing touches on the duckling when the compartment door slid open and Tori entered. Ginny sat up from her nap at the sound and narrowed her eyes blearily at the girl. Of course, Tori had her school robes on now. Emblazoned on the breast pocket of her robes was the Slytherin crest. I said nothing. Ginny spoke first.

"Wrong compartment," she said bluntly, but Tori didn't pay any heed to her and sat down next to me tossing her feet onto my knees. She produced Gus from one of her pockets and set him down on her stomach. The fat rodent curled up and nuzzled his head into her robes. She had pluck.

"Hey, Harry," the Slytherin greeted.

"Hi, Tori," I said, staring at her feet. "Any reason I'm acting the footrest?"

"I'm short," she replied. I had to smile at that.

"You're lucky you're cute, or else I'd smack you," I said and showed her my picture. "Look, I drew a duckling." She looked at my drawing and stifled a laugh. I frowned.

“That’s a duck?” she asked, cheeks pink with mirth.

“Duckling,” I corrected, “As in a baby duck. One not yet fully matured.”

“It looks like a seal with feathers,” Tori said.

“Heh?”

“You forgot the bill,” the Third year answered, smiling widely.

“No way,” I muttered, staring at the bill-less duckling. “That bites.”

“Harry,” Ginny choked out. I looked at her.

“Hmm?”

“That girl’s a Slytherin!”

“I’m not blind, I can clearly see her outfit,” I replied. Tori let out a laugh at the horrified look on Ginny’s face.

“Speaking of that,” I said turning to Tori, “where’s your sister?” She wrinkled her nose.

“Finishing her essays, she said I was bothering her.”

“I bet you were.” She nodded.

“I was.” I snorted. The girl leaned back and grabbed the parchment and my pen. Gus snuffled and sat up. Upon seeing me, he flashed a rat-ish smile and bounded over, but fell off of Tori and onto the seat. He struggled, trying to right himself.

“Idiot rat,” Tori mumbled, scooping him up and dumping him on me. The animal sniffed at my fingers and began nibbling at my fingernails curiously. I flicked his tail with my other hand.

“So,” I asked, “How much longer do you reckon we’ve got until we reach Hogwarts?”

"At least an hour," Ginny answered staring at Tori, "You do know she's a Slytherin right? She can't be trusted."

"Broken record," I said. "And I never said I trusted her, I don't trust you or Neville either." Ginny frowned.

"Really," Tori bleated, thrusting her bottom lip out at me, her green eyes beginning to water. I nodded.

"Yeah, so don't bother crying or I'll treat you like a baby and lock you in my trunk."

"I hadn't even started yet," she grumbled wiping her eyes, "Mum at least lets me blubber for a minute." Ginny made a sound, almost as if to say 'see, I told you!' I shrugged and was about to let her know that I could handle it, when the lights went out and the train ground noisily to a stop.

Neville woke with a loud snort and yelped. I'd wager the look on his face was priceless as he flopped about in the dark. Sadly, I couldn't see anything due to that same dark. Tori jumped up and pressed herself against me. I got my arm free and patted her head, extricating her from around me. I felt Gus scamper off of me and onto his owner.

"Gus can see in the dark," Tori whispered. I stopped myself mid-nod, she wouldn't be able to see it anyway.

"Lucky him," I whispered back. "Does he speak English as well?"

"Not a bit."

"Well then," I muttered. "He's pretty much useless considering he doesn't have thumbs either."

"Hey guys," Neville whispered, "Why are we whispering?" I thought about that, but not wanting to be wrong, formulated an argument.

"So we can hear what's going on outside," I whispered to the boy.

“Oh.”

“What is going on?” Ginny asked quietly. Tori shifted next to me, I suppose messing with Gus.

“We won’t be able to hear anything, the boxes are soundproof,” she said after a moment. Neville gulped audibly.

“H-H-Harry,” Neville stuttered, “y-you don’t th-think there are—.”

“Stop right there, Neville,” I said, raising my voice to a normal level. “If you say ‘Dementor’ I will not hesitate to slap you. Very, very hard.”

“O-ok,” He replied fearfully. “But what if...”

“Don’t even think it, Neville,” Ginny said quietly.

“Why not, you aren’t scared of Dementors are you, Harry?” Tori asked poking my side. I drew away from her.

“N-no, I can handle them,” I replied, cursing myself for the slight falter at the beginning.

“Ooh, you are, aren’t you,” she bubbled. I could almost feel the smile on her face.

“No I’m not,” I said. I remembered the boggart I’d encountered after the party. That, that image of me had definitely not been a Dementor.

“Yes you are, handling them is one thing, you can still be afraid,” Tori whined.

“I am not scared of Dementors.”

“Um, Harry,” Neville said. “Isn’t your boggart a Dementor?”

“I’m not scared of them!”

“Are too,” Tori said.

“Am not!” I said.

“Are too.”

“Am not.”

“Do you really have babies in your trunk?” Neville asked suddenly. I turned to where his voice seemed to come from.

“Why, Hungry?” Neville didn’t respond.

“Ahem,” Tori began anew, “scaredy-cat!”

“I am not,” I replied.

“Yes. You. Are.”

“I am not, that is slander!” I yelled at where I thought Tori was. She giggled.

“Lumos,” Ginny incanted, her wand lit up. It cast light across most of the compartment, revealing Tori looking for Gus inside her robes, Neville cowering on the floor, and myself sitting straight up, wary.

I’m like a fucking jaguar, roar.

I stood and pulled my own wand out, adding my light to Ginny’s. Neville did the same. I glanced at Tori, who was now holding Gus up by his obese throat.

“What,” she said staring at me blankly, “You think I bother to read ahead?”

“That’s right, you’re only just a Third year,” I grinned. At that moment the train came back to life, throwing Ginny back, and sending Neville forward and me onto the floor. Tori dropped her rat onto my head. I grunted an obscene phrase at her and the rat.

“Heh, I win,” she said.

After we had righted ourselves and gotten into our respective seats, I stood again and peeked out into the hall. Spying Ron jogging down our way, I opened the door fully and allowed him to enter. Convenient, no?

"What the hell happened?" I questioned. He made sure that Ginny was alright before answering me.

"The house elf that work in the engine room, um, fell in," He said, somber, "His corpse was apparently good fuel, because there was a lot of coal, but no elf when the Head Boy checked. The train just sort of stopped."

"Why'd the lights go out then?" Tori asked. Ron looked at her, particularly her robes, and then to me. I said nothing. He shrugged and answered her.

"Train's powered completely by coal," he said, "Once the elf was gone everything shut down."

"So," I said, drawing out the word, "Who's putting the coal in now?" Ron's face split into a huge smile. He rubbed his palms together and sat down next to his sister.

"Well I've good news and bad news. I'll need to tell you the bad news first, though," he said looking around at all of us. We all nodded at him.

"Malfoy's prefect, as well as some kid named Theodore Nott," he said, smile fading. "That's the bad news." Neville whimpered. Ginny made a face and asked Ron how that was possible, as Malfoy was most ill-fit to be prefect. He shrugged his shoulders.

"Beats the hell out of me."

"Malfoy is the most well-known of the Slytherins. I can guarantee he's going to make the other House's hate us more than they do now," Tori said. "I don't know much about Theodore though. He's really quiet." I shrugged. It figured that Malfoy was going to abuse his power.

Nott was an unknown, but I wasn't going to worry about it right now. I patted Tori's shoulder.

"Don't worry," I told the girl. "It's actually all my fault that everyone hates your House." She stuck her tongue out at me.

"Well, the good news is that we drew straws to see who'd take over coal duty," Ron broke in. "Guess who got the smallest one?"

"Malfoy," I answered.

"Yeah," He said, smile faltering, "I suppose giving you the bad news first gave it away, huh?" I nodded. He shrugged and leaned back. After a few minutes he sat up and grabbed Ginny's arm to look at her watch. He then stood up and slid open the doors.

"I have to go. I need to help with the Firsties." I stood and followed him out.

"You really like this job don't you?" I asked. He looked shiftily down the hall and nodded.

"Just don't tell the Fred and George, alright?"

"Sure," I said. "If it makes you happy." Ron flashed one last smile and hurried off down the hall. I went the other way.

Alone, I looked out the window at the nighttime scenery. The train slowed as it went around a curve, and I saw the expanse of the Forbidden Forest in front of me. The school itself was visible at last in the distance, its spires and turrets all alight for the welcoming feast.

But somehow I couldn't shake the feeling that this wasn't going to be the best of years. I laughed then, out loud.

"When has it ever been any better," I muttered. I turned away from the window and walked back to the compartment.

AN: So yeah, next chapter: Jupiter.

Hope you enjoyed.

Chapter XIII: Jupiter

I stepped off the train and onto the platform of the Hogsmeade train station. Evan and Emma came with me, as was usual. I stumbled forward slightly as light from lamps that hung above us blinded me. I shut my eyes in surprise. So much for the same old Hogwarts I'd been hoping for, the lights were new additions to the platform. The Governors must have passed the budget. I reopened my eyes and spied Evan standing next to me patiently. His sister, however, had started off without us. My lips quirked up into a grin as I watched the blonde hurry off.

"Tom," the teen standing next me began, "I don't know—"

"Leave it," I said. "Let's just continue, I'm feeling rather hungry. I hope they have roast turkey again..." Evan Rosier frowned at me.

"I told you to eat during the ride." The boy was tall, almost as tall as myself. We had both grown during the summer, only Evan had packed on more muscle whereas I had just stretched. His dark hair complemented his bright blue eyes, and he had recently begun to grow facial hair. However, shaving seemed to not be a habit of his yet, as hair covered his cheeks, chin, and upper lip in a shadow. He stared at me, as if expecting a retort.

I shrugged and advanced down the walk, "I've other plans for that money, Evan." The Sixth Year followed me.

"I'm just putting that out there, Tom. You can listen to me sometimes you know, I've been known to be very apt." My eyebrows rose. I looked at him. His face was blank. That alone gave me reason for suspicion.

"Have you been reading those motivational pamphlets again, Rosier?" I questioned. He didn't so much as blink. I chuckled. Evan scowled at me, lengthening his strides.

"So what? I saw you reading a book as thick as my thigh on the ride here, why can't I read pamphlets?"

"I never said that you couldn't read them, I was just asking if you had been," I replied. We turned the corner and stepped off the cobbles and onto a dirt path.

"The tone implied that you had a problem," he grumbled. I shrugged. We pressed on, making for the carriages that were lined up ready to take us to the castle. Once we were close enough to join the mass of students, I sighed. Lines. I stood on my tiptoes quickly and scanned the crowd. My mouth bent into a frown. I found no one that I could approach so that we could get ahead. It seems that this wave was mostly Ravenclaw.

"How long do you wager the wait is?" Evan questioned. I shrugged.

"I don't care how long the wait is, Evan, I'm more for finding someone we can bump a ride off of." He made an agreeing sound and looked to the fore again. He pointed ahead suddenly.

"Look, there are Emma and Nancy. They're a bit farther ahead of us. D'you want to go?" My mouth twisted as I thought on the idea.

"If your sister attacks, you're taking the hit," I said finally. He looked at me, curious. I grinned and pushed through the crowd flashing my new prefect badge. Evan followed closely until we reached Emma and her Hufflepuff companion.

"Hello," Nancy Bones greeted. "Congratulations, I see you've made prefect, Tom, and you've embraced manhood, Evan."

"Not yet, I turn seventeen next month, Bones," Evan grunted. I said my thanks to her and eyed Emma. The younger Rosier was in my year. Her eyes were nearly the same blue as Evan's, but her face was softer and more round-ish than his. She was taller than average, and her light blonde hair fell neatly to her shoulders. Emma's prefect badge was pinned to her robes, the silver was dull in the dim light produced by the carriages, but I still could make out the twisting snake beneath the 'P.' I smiled winningly at her, keeping my arm ready to haul Evan in front of me.

"Emma," I began once I realized that she wouldn't talk to me.

“Thomas,” she replied.

“My name is Tom, not Thomas,” I said as I inclined my head to her.

“I can call you what I like, Riddle,” she said. I smirked and leaned toward her.

“Care to test that?”

She huffed and turned away from me. Emma then greeted her brother, more warmly than she did me, and struck up a conversation with him about O.W.L exams. She was trying to ignore me. I was content to let her. I stood and waited while the other students boarded the carriages. Soon it was our turn to get on one. Emma was only a tad reluctant to.

“Oh look, I think the one ahead of us has a spare seat...” She made for it. I reached into my pocket and pulled a carved whistle out. Blowing into it lightly, I smirked as the Thestrals attached our carriage bucked and hauled themselves around to face me, effectively stopping Emma from getting on the one ahead.

Emma whirled, angry. I jammed the whistle back into my pocket before she could see it. Evan scowled at me. Nancy had jumped onto him, afraid. Honestly, I’d expect them to be scared if they could actually see them. The thestrals tossed their dragonish heads and looked about. I approached the carriage.

“Pansies,” I muttered, while pulling the door open and allowing them to enter before me.

I pulled the door open and waited as Neville, Ginny, Tori and Ron boarded the carriage. I blinked at the Thestrals. The rain began to fall at a steadier pace and the wind picked up again. The horse-bats didn’t seem the least bit bothered by it. They didn’t even whinny or neigh or make bat related onomatopoeia. I shrugged and entered.

Inside, Neville sat across from Ginny at the farthest end from me, and next to Neville sat Tori. She sat across from a blonde girl that was

eyeing us all quite strangely. Freaking Ravenclaws. Next to Tori, Ron had squeezed himself in. There were six of us total, inside. There were four clearly defined seats.

"Alright," I began, throwing my hood back. "I'll make this easy for those of you that are arithmetically impaired. There are six humans inside the carriage, the carriage has four seats. How many people are going to walk to the castle?" After a moment, the new girl raised her hand and waved it about wildly. My eyebrows rose.

"Ok, you," I said, nodding to her.

"Two of us are going to have to walk to the castle," she replied neatly, smiling. I smiled back. That was one possibility, the one with the most fun involved.

"Right!" I said. "Noses!" I immediately jabbed my finger at my nose. The newcomer did so as well, almost as fast as I had. Ron followed suit, and after a moment so did Tori. Ginny and Neville were left. Belatedly, Neville put his finger on his nose. I repressed a snicker and opened the door. Ron protested. I grinned.

"Then what do you propose we do, Mr. Prefect?" I asked, leaving the door open. Ron rubbed his chin.

"All the girls can squeeze together over there, and you, Neville, and I can sit over here." Just then, the carriage lurched forward. The door swung shut.

"Well, that plan's out," I said, sitting hastily on Tori's lap. She squealed. The thestrals trundled along, anyway. Tori struggled from beneath me.

"Cap it, I'm not that heavy," I mumbled. Tori said something that sounded like 'yes you are,' but I couldn't be sure. I lifted myself off of her and turned about.

"Are you calling me fat, midget?" She stuck her tongue out at me. The Ravenclaw girl laughed. It wasn't a dainty laugh or a giggle, or a titter, or any synonyms for that, but a full blown, roaring laugh. My mouth

twitched. I waited for the girl to calm down. She didn't. I grumbled and pushed Tori over so that I could sit properly. The Slytherin stared at the Ravenclaw girl with something akin to confusion.

"What's so funny?" she asked me, as the strange girl wiped her eyes on her sleeve. I shrugged. I refused to comment fearing that my amazing wit would set her off again.

"You're Harry Potter," the Ravenclaw said afterwards, looking at me. I nodded. She smiled.

"You are funny." My mouth twisted. That can be taken many ways.

"Funny how?" I said turning and leaning my back against the wall. Tori tossed her legs up over mine. The girl laughed again, it was shorter this time though.

"Too funny," she gasped out. I looked about.

"I suppose it's too late for me to walk, then?" I asked to no one in particular. The girl giggled. Ron stuck his head around Tori.

"Harry, I didn't see Hagrid by the lake," the redhead said. I stared at him.

"Just realizing that now, Ron? He's not here, obviously. That Grubbly-Plank tart was rounding them First Years up."

"Where could he be?"

I shrugged and rested my head against the wall of the vehicle. Ron looked at Neville, who also shrugged. The littlest Weasley then leaned forward.

"You don't think he's on a mission for—"

"Ginny," I barked. The girl squeaked. I glared at her.

"Do you think, girl?" I asked. She stared at me, her cheeks reddening.

“Never mind, the answer is obvious,” I muttered. Ron snorted, but turned his budding laughter into a cough.

“Mission? For who?” Tori asked, staring at me. Neville nodded as well.

“Classified,” I said. After a second, I chuckled. “Damn, I’ve never gotten to say that before.”

“Really?” I asked. Luna Lovegood nodded. She showed me the article and I had to hold back my laughter. Well that was something. Sirius Black was, according to the Quibbler, actually Stubby Boardman, lead vocalist of the wizarding band, the Hobgoblins. Tori peered at the article as well.

“Mum doesn’t let Daphne and I read the Quibbler,” Tori said. “She says it’s all rubbish.” Luna stopped walking and glared at the third year.

“My father is the editor.” My eyebrows rose. That explained quite a bit. I hesitantly laid a hand on the blonde’s shoulder. The Ravenclaw twitched away from me.

“I’m sure Tori meant that in the nicest possible way, Luna,” I said. I turned to Tori and stared at her. She shrugged and stretched her hand out towards the magazine.

“Can I have a look at it, Luna?” she asked. “I just want to see what it’s like.” Luna glared at Tori for a moment longer before stiffly handing the magazine to her.

“Thanks.”

“Don’t rip the pages,” Luna said simply. She turned and made for the Great Hall. My mouth twisted. The quirky girl had a soft spot. Figures, it was the press.

“Careful,” I muttered to Tori. “You shouldn’t believe everything that’s written in there... unless it’s properly cited. If it is, then you can believe it.” Tori snickered and opened the Quibbler. I looked about the grand foyer of Hogwarts. Numerous students milled about finding

friends and then heading into the Great Hall to wait for the Sorting. I made my way around a few small Gryffindor girls that clung to each other tightly, they were probably Second Years. Tori followed me. I stopped suddenly, remembering something. The Slytherin girl walked into my back.

“Why’d we stop?” She said, not looking up from Luna’s magazine. I turned and looked down at her.

“Why’d you stop?”

“Because you stopped!” She exclaimed looking up at me.

I patted her head, “It’s ok to be a follower, Tori.” She stuck her tongue out at me. Right, off track did I get.

“Tori,” I began again. She nodded at me.

“Where’s your sister?” She opened her mouth, closed it, looked around her, and finally shrugged. “Beats me.”

“You’re very irresponsible,” I muttered. “If I were you, I wouldn’t let Daphne out of my sight.” I drew myself up to my full height and looked around. Scowling, I stood on my tiptoes. I wasn’t tall enough.

“Anything?” the smaller Third Year questioned.

“Nope,” I replied, scouring the area for Daphne’s face or rather, her tits. I remembered them most fondly. Tori shrugged.

“Whatever, I’ll see her in the common room, later. Let’s go.”

“But I won’t get to see them—er... her, later,” I complained. Tori tutted and moved off.

“Was that the first time you’ve ever seen a woman’s breasts, Harry?”

“Well, I can’t, nor would I like to, remember breast feeding, so yeah, it was,” I replied. Tori giggled.

“You weren’t supposed to answer...”

“Oh, ha-ha. You’re funny, hilarious even.” She stopped and glanced back at me.

“I know.”

I grunted and nudged her forward with my knee. We entered the dressed up Great Hall and as usual the food smelled nice, but it was nowhere to be seen. My stomach growled. I followed Tori halfway to the Slytherin table before I realised what I was doing. Scowling at the now laughing girl, I turned and stalked over to the Gryffindor table. I chose a seat somewhere near the middle, where I figured the roast turkey would appear, and set my chin on my plate. I sat like that for roughly ten minutes while the rest of the students were being ushered into the Hall. My fellow Fifth Years shot me hesitant smiles and moved off to sit closer to the head table. I flipped each of them off as they passed. After the great doors had been shut, I sat up and stared at the timid faces of the people that surrounded me. Excepting Neville, the majority of the children sitting next to or around me were Second or Third Years. Ouch.

I squinted at a redheaded boy that had taken a seat next to me. He flinched, but didn’t make a sound.

“You guys,” I said, looking around at the younger kids. I smiled widely “How many of you actually wanted to sit near me?” Dennis Creevey and a few of the girls raised their hands, and slowly a couple of other boys did as well. Poor turnout.

“Eh. That’s kind of sad.” I frowned. Just then, Ron hurried over and nudged two of the younger children over so that he could fit in across from me. He looked out of breath. I waited patiently until he had calmed down.

“I’m starving,” he said at last. Well. I nodded at him and scowled as Hermione approached. She fit herself in next to Ron and stared at me. I ignored her in favor of messing with my silverware. Eventually, the double doors opened again and in trooped the bedraggled and wet First Years. Professor Minerva McGonagall led them. The hall went

mostly silent. After leading them up to the raised platform where a single wooden stool sat, the professor picked a grubby looking hat up from the head table and set it on the stool. As it touched down, it seemed to wake up. The hat shuddered and puffed itself up, a cut at the brim opening and closing rhythmically. The hall went still. The Sorting Hat began to sing:

In times of old when I was new

And Hogwarts barely started,

The founders of our noble school

Thought never to be parted:

United by a common goal,

They had the selfsame yearning,

To make the world's best magic school

And pass along their learning.

“Together we will build and teach!”

The four great friends decided,

And never did they think that they

Might someday be divided,

Where were there such friends anywhere

As Salazar and dear Godric?

Unless it was the second pair

Of Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw?

So how could it have gone so wrong?

How could such friendship fail?

Why, I was there and so can tell

The whole sad sorry tale.

Said Slytherin, "We'll teach just those

Whose ambition is the surest."

Said Ravenclaw, "We'll teach those whose

Intelligence is supreme."

Said Gryffindor, "We'll teach all those

With brave deeds to their name,"

Said Hufflepuff, "We'll teach those whose

Hearts and minds as purest."

These differences caused little strife

When they first came to light,

For each of the founders had

A House in which they might

Take only those they wanted, so,

For instance, Slytherin

Took only pure-blood wizards

Of ambition, such as he,

And only those of sharpest wit,

Were taught by Ravenclaw
Where the boldest and the bravest
Went to daring Gryffindor!
Good Hufflepuff, (feeling bad) she took all the rest,
And taught them all she knew,
Thus the Houses and their founders four
Retained friendships firm and true.
So Hogwarts worked in agreement
For a number of glad years
But then discord crept among us,
And fed on our faults and fears.
The Houses that, like pillars four,
Had once held up our school,
Now turned upon each other and,
Divided, sought to rule,
And for a while it seemed Hogwarts
Would see an early end,
What with dueling and with fighting,
The clash of friend on friend
And at last there came that morning

When old Slytherin departed
And though the fighting then died down
He left us quite downhearted.
And never since the founders four
Were whittled down to three,
Have their Houses been united,
As they were once meant to be.
And now the Sorting hat is here
And you all know the score:
I sort you into Houses
Because that is what I'm for,
But now I must go further,
Please listen to my song:
Though condemned I am to part you
I still worry that it's wrong.
Though I must fulfill my duty
And quarter you this year,
Still I wonder whether sorting
May not bring the end I fear.
Oh, know the dangers, understand the signs,

The warning history shows,
For our Hogwarts is in danger
From external, deadly foes!
We must form up inside her,
Or we'll crumble from within,
I have told you, I have warned you....
Let the Sorting now begin!

I clapped along with the rest of the hall, but still that did not drown out the steady whispering that had begun throughout the room. After a bit the only people left clapping and not talking were the Weasley twins and I. George clapped nine times, I clapped eight after him. George clapped five, Fred clapped twice. I stood up and clapped twice. Fred clapped once. George clapped again; I clapped and Fred followed up with a single clap. The twins both clapped at the same time. I clapped once. Fred clapped twice, George clapped twice as well. Fred clapped one time. I reluctantly clapped twice. Grinning Fred clapped doubly. Up at his table, Dumbledore cleared his throat and let off a BANG from his wand. We stared at him. He didn't meet my eyes, yet again. His eyes swept the entire hall before resting on the Gryffindor table. I slowly sat down. Dumbledore nodded.

"Thank you, Mr. Potter, Mr. Weasley, and Mr. Weasley. I am sure the Sorting hat is happy that it has pleased its fan base," he said, "but..." He clapped once. "I win."

"Cheater!" I called out. The twins agreed. Dumbledore shook his head, smiling as the hall roared with laughter.

"This is not the time to contest, boys. And now that we've ruined the serious atmosphere that the Sorting Hat worked so hard to provide," the Headmaster said, "I fear the Sorting must begin."

"Thank you, Headmaster," McGonagall said, glaring at the twins and me. She drew a scroll from her deep pockets and unfurled it. Clearing her throat she read off the first name. "Abercrombie, Euan." A skinny blonde boy stepped forward and hurried up to the hat. I turned to Ron and Neville.

"That was quite the song, eh?" Neville nodded, a dazed look on his face. He bent forward as if scared.

"You guys don't think that, that y-you-know-who is going to attack Hogwarts? Do you?"

"I rather doubt it," I replied quietly, looking shiftily at the younger kids. "Cover your ears." They stared at me. I pulled my wand out and pressed it into the young redhead's throat. "Please?" He clapped his hands over his ears. The rest soon followed suit.

"Now, where were we?"

"Harry!" Hermione cut in. I looked at her.

"Hermione!" I called genially.

"It's not funny, Harry. That was mean." I tilted my head.

"I'm a mean person." She crinkled her forehead and stared at me intently.

"No, you are not. At least you weren't." I shrugged and turned back to Neville.

"I don't think that our friend Voldemort will be attacking for a while yet."

Ron leaned forward, "Why?"

"A flaming bird told me," I said, leaning forward and motioning for Hermione to close the pseudo-circle we'd formed. She did, albeit reluctantly. Ron grinned and looked expectant.

“Nope, I’m not saying what exactly, but the word is that he’s waiting something. Or rather looking. He’s not at exact full strength by the Headmaster’s calculations, and won’t be until June, when, well when one year had fully passed.”

“That explains why it was so easy for you to escape last year...”
Hermione said. I scoffed.

“No, I attribute that to my immense skill and talent, Hermione. But yes, that’s why he didn’t kill me with his little finger curled about his wand.”
Neville had a shocked look on his face, as if he didn’t believe that Voldemort could get any stronger.

“Oh yes,” I said. “It can get worse.” Neville suppressed a shudder.

“So he won’t make a move until the summer, then?” Ron questioned.
Hermione made a noise. We looked at her. She looked at me.

“He’s planning something, isn’t he?” My mouth twisted up at the corner. I nodded.

“What is it?”

“How should I know?”

Hermione pointed at her forehead, “Didn’t it, um, you know, react?”

I glared at her. “What am I, a Voldemort sensor?”

“I didn’t mean it like that—”

“Yeah, yeah,” I grumbled. “Anyway, it’s just been flashes and dreams from time to time. Nothing substantial, not like a surveillance feed from inside his head or anything.”

“Dreams?” She said sharply. I nodded.

“They could me—have you told Dumbledore?” she said. I sneered at her.

“You dropped Divination, Hermione. I can interpret my own dreams. So don’t pontificate.” She raised her eyebrows at me.

“Really, Trelawney can teach?” Ron cut in before I could strangle her.

“What are the dreams about?”

“Doors. Wine cellars. Hallways. Snakes. Libraries. Azkaban.” I ticked off my more recent nighttime adventures.

“And what do they mean?” Hermione asked.

“I’m getting cream cheese and a hooker for Christmas,” I said bluntly.

“What! And you’re content to just—” I held up my hand. Dumbledore had risen and was about to speak. We all sat down, and I allowed the children to take their hands from their ears. The Headmaster held up his goblet.

“Now,” Dumbledore began, “to our new charges: welcome! To our old hands: welcome back! I hope this year will sail along as smoothly as those previous, and that you all will learn something that will be useful to some end. On another note, Hogwarts has suffered a couple of staffing changes that I would like to make known.” My eyes swept the head table, counting faces.

“First, I would like you all to welcome back Professor Grubbly-Plank, who will be filling in for Professor Hagrid while he is on leave,” the Headmaster said, gesturing to the woman. The hall applauded lightly.

“Second, I would like to introduce Professor Umbridge, who has kindly offered to take the Defense Against the Dark Arts position.” My eyes widened as they landed on a toad-like woman that was wearing a pink cardigan. She had been at my trial. The students clapped politely, not sure what to make of the lady. I didn’t clap with them. Hermione apparently caught the look on my face.

“Harry,” she began, “do you know her?” I glanced at the bushy-headed prefect and nodded once.

"She was at my trial. Fudge's Undersecretary." Hermione stared hard at the woman who now had her eyes glued onto the headmaster.

"No, it can't be," she mumbled. I grunted.

"If you're thinking what I'm thinking, then yeah, it is. By the way, I called it first." Hermione's mouth bent slightly.

Dumbledore continued his speech. "...Mr. Filch, who is currently preparing confiscation notices, has asked me to tell you that Fanged Frisbees are now outlawed from the castle. In addition to the Frisbees, Mr. Zonko's new dungbombs are forbidden, as well as many items I can't seem to fit in my head. Never fear, though, the full list is posted outside Mr. Filch's office. Also, as some may remember, others may not, magic is forbidden in the corridors. Do not be caught waving wands about, or suffer detention with the Professor that is in charge of that wing. The Forbidden Forest is, as its name implies, forbidden to all students. Most of the veterans know better than to venture into it, but for those of you that see fit to do so anyway, I must remind you that Professor Hagrid is not here to save you. Now that those boring safety clauses are out of the way, I feel the need to remind you all that learning is supposed to be fun, and you all are supposed to enjoy yourselves to the fullest while you attend my school. Quidditch will begin again this year, and tryouts for the House teams that have vacancies will begin in the first week of October." This time I cheered along with the hall. I'd be able to have a bit of fun again.

"The choir is also looking for new members, or so Professor Vector has told me," Dumbledore said looking at the elderly professor, "and I would like to announce that Madam Pin—" Dumbledore stopped his speech and turned to look behind him at the new Defense professor. Umbridge stood and approached the Headmaster's podium. The staff table inhaled, and glared at the new woman almost as one. Dumbledore turned to the Ministry woman.

"Yes, Professor Umbridge?"

"I would like to address the students briefly, Headmaster," the woman said. Her voice lilted like a broken harp; sick and wrong but still faintly

sweet. Dumbledore nodded and backed away, returning to his seat. I looked at Hermione, whose jaw was slack.

“Called it,” I muttered. Ron looked at us.

“What’s going on?” he asked. Hermione shushed him and gestured to the woman. Umbridge smiled. I shuddered openly. Her teeth were oddly pointed. Something felt distinctly wrong about her, as if what she was to do here was a personal ambition rather than a job.

“Well, I surely am glad to be back at Hogwarts,” she began, “and I see that my old Ravenclaw House is doing splendidly.” However Ravenclaw House didn’t seem to be thrilled that its alumnus was doing too splendidly. They looked sick. I turned my gaze back to the she-toad. She had let out a peal of breathy laughter that was almost enough to make me shove my fork in my ear. Then she began her actual speech.

“The Ministry of Magic...” I looked at Hermione, and then to Dumbledore. The man was staring at Umbridge carefully, and to anyone it would seem that he was genuinely interested, but I, having been on the other side of that look many a time before, knew better. He was analyzing every word that came out of her mouth. He wouldn’t do anything about it upon finding out what need be found, but he would know her back and front by the end.

“...progress for progress’s sake must be impeded. The methods that have been tried and tested, that have proven to be effective, often require no tinkering, or change at all. It is for change to come that we must adhere to a balance of new and old, of innovation and tradition. For only through this will the generations that follow find true progress.” I looked away from Umbridge for a moment, and took in the hall’s reaction. By now, most of the students below fifth year had found other things to occupy themselves, such as playing with silverware or conversing with their neighbours. Others were barely clinging to sanity by trying to listen, and still more were growing shocked and some even angered by what the hag was spewing.

“...because some changes will be known to have been for the better, while others will be seen as an error in judgment. It is in this era of

change that we must try to remain constant. We will move surely forward, but in a way that will: protect what need be protected, perfect what ought to be perfected, and prune what practices need be pruned,” Umbridge finished, returning to her seat and sitting down smartly. Dumbledore stood, clapping. It took the students a few moments longer than the head table to realize that it was time to applaud. I didn’t clap. Dumbledore nodded to Undersecretary Umbridge once more before turning to the student body.

“Thank you, Professor Umbridge, that was most illuminating,” he said. “Now I’ve quite forgotten the rest of my announcements, hmm.” The old man shrugged.

“Oh well, let’s eat.” With that the food appeared on the tables. I turned to Hermione.

“Was it everything that you expected, my dear?” She sniffed and looked away from the head table.

“And more. Did you hear all that she was saying? Pruning, and prohibiting, and —”

“And all those other nice words that begin with ‘p,’ yeah, I heard. What I loved was the vague closing part.” Hermione nodded rapidly.

“Hey,” Ron broke in, “D’you know what else begins with ‘p,’ pie!” I looked at his plate; it was still crowded with food he hadn’t yet touched. I stared at my own. It was very much empty. Deciding to leave discussion for later, I joined Ron in the plundering of the victuals and tucked in. Hermione stared at the both of us in mild disgust before loading her plate as well.

“Hey,” I greeted, coming up behind Daphne. She whirled about and stared at me. Her hair was now tied back in a loose ponytail, and flecks of ink sparsely dotted her neck and left cheek. She smiled.

“Oh hi, Harry. I was just about to head off to the common room....” She trailed off. I shrugged and gestured behind me where the Gryffindors were filing out of the hall as one.

"That's fine; I suppose I can walk with you. Ron has gone off to lead the First Years." She blinked at me. Her cheeks pinked slightly, very slightly. I took a step back and looked for Tori. She was nowhere to be found. I looked back at the Slytherin girl and opened my mouth to inquire, but Daphne spoke first.

"Don't you need the password for your dormitory?" She asked. I shrugged, turned to where she was about to exit, and motioned her to follow. I knew the way to the Slytherin common room, at least I think I can remember from Second year. I glanced back at Daphne.

"It's Jupiter, I believe, or Jove, something to that effect," I said. Daphne raised an eyebrow as she followed behind me. I motioned for her to lead the way. She overtook me and looked back, reversing the previous role.

"You didn't have to tell me it," she said. I shrugged.

"It doesn't matter much; I doubt you'd bother to trek all the way up there to abuse the knowledge." A smirk spilt her face.

"You know, I think I just might now that you've mentioned it." I lengthened my strides and pulled even with her. I leaned in slightly.

"Oh really?"

She pushed me back and laughed, "Was that supposed to be intimidating, Potter?"

"Make of it what you will," I said turning down the hall opposite the one that led to the kitchens. Daphne looked at me strangely.

"What?" I questioned. She stopped walking and set her hands on her hips.

"How did you know where to turn?" I smirked.

"I get around, Miss Greengrass; there are very few places I cannot find within these here big stone walls." She stepped back.

"So you've been to our common room before?" I nodded. She huffed and continued on down the hall. Rubbing my chin, I followed.

"Where's Tori," I asked as we neared the entrance to the Slytherin common room. Daphne turned and shrugged.

"How come whenever I run into one of you, you never know where the other is?" I muttered. Daphne giggled.

"Tori had to return some magazine to a Ravenclaw girl, at least so she said."

"Ah, Luna," I said.

"Lovegood?" Daphne asked, running her hand along the stone wall. I nodded.

"She's a strange one," Daphne said stopping in front of a blank section of wall. "Nice girl, but strange."

"So I figured," I said, stopping as well. Daphne turned to the wall and looked up. A small stone snake's head jutted from above.

"Thrones," she called out. The wall swung inward, revealing the entrance to the room. She entered and bid me farewell. I snorted and walked in after her. Surprised, she jumped as I appeared behind her in the short entrance hall. The wall swung shut. Daphne glared at me.

"I wasn't going to come all the way down here without coming inside," I said. She began to protest but gave up when she saw that I had stepped past her.

"Fine then," she muttered from behind me. "Do what you like." I chuckled.

"I intend to." I continued on out of the entrance hall and into the common room itself. Unlike my common room, it was rectangular in shape, and the colouring lent an earthier feel than the crimson and purple of the Gryffindor room. The couches and armchairs were a nice shade of green, and the floor was covered with a light brown

carpet, various shades of green and brown were scattered, much like the Slytherins themselves, here and there throughout the room.

“Welcome,” Daphne said dully, from beside me. “I know it isn’t grand or spectacular, but it’s ours.” I looked at her. She stared back.

“What, you were embarrassed to bring me in here?” Her cheeks pinked again.

“Yeah, I figured the Gryffindor quarters were much nicer and...” I tapped her shoulder lightly.

“Is that what you lot think, that we have a grandiose barracks system up above? We’re not much better off than you guys, in fact the last time I saw this place it was dressed up nicer than the bleeding Titanic.”

“So, we’ve been thinking the same things about each other, I suppose,” She said gesturing for me to follow her. We crossed the floor to the couches that sat around a large stone fireplace. I dropped myself into the leftmost loveseat. Daphne sat next to me and leaned back into the cushions. I watched, amused.

“Happy?” I inquired. She nodded.

“Tori’s not going to be too happy with you, though. That’s her seat.” I shrugged and looked around the room. A group of First years were sitting on the other side, all staring at me confusedly. Come to think, not many older children were around. I sat up and looked behind me. Yep, no fifth, sixth, or seventh years were to be seen.

“Hey, Daphne,” I began, “where are all the older kids? There are just a bunch of ickle ones here.” The girl that I’d addressed opened her eyes and pointed to the two doors that were at the far end of the room.

“They’re in their dorms; no one comes out here much anymore.”

“Oh, so no Malfoy then, thankfully,” I muttered. I did however look around for the Nott boy. Daphne snorted.

“That idiot is probably already out patrolling the halls,” she said. “He was practically wetting himself in glee during the feast. He wants to get you, you know.”

“So I figured,” I muttered leaning back as well. Just then Tori and a few others entered the room, I recognized two faces, and could vaguely place a third. Tracy Davis, Millicent Bulstrode, and assorted others made immediately for their dorm, not even looking my way, while the younger Greengrass sister and a boy approached us.

“Outta my seat, Potter,” Tori ordered, hefting a large cardboard box that was decorated with stars and unicorns. I looked at her over my glasses.

“I’m too heavy, I can’t move.” Tori grumbled and set down her box. She grabbed my arm and tried to pull me out of the chair, but failed. I stuck my tongue out at her.

“Oi, Brian, help.” The boy that stood next to her shook his head.

“No way, I’m not touchin’ ‘im,” he said, backing away. I looked at the boy, he had a familiar look to him almost like...

“Avery?” I asked him. He blinked at me, before scowling.

“Ulster,” he said. I squinted at him.

“No, Avery, definitely.” The boy sighed.

“Thomas Avery is my Uncle on my mam’s side,” he said. “Happy?”

“No need to be a prick, boy,” I said. By this time Tori given up on pulling me up and was stomping on my feet. Daphne groaned and made room for her sister to sit. Tori forced herself in and hauled her box onto her lap, pushing Daphne into me. Her elbow dug into my side. I yelped and stood up. Tori grinned in triumph and set her box down next to her. I scowled.

“There’s no winning with her, Potter,” the Ulster boy said.

"I don't take losing well," I said. I drew my wand and summoned Tori's box. The girl sat up and pulled her own wand out. I grinned.

"What are you going to do, blow sparks at me?" She looked to her older sister, whose eyes were closed once again.

"Daph?" Tori said.

"Deal with it yourself, Tori," the older girl replied. I looked at the box.

"What's in this thing anyway?" I asked.

"The Quibbler," Ulster answered.

"Heh?" Tori stood up and pried the box away from me, my wand clattered to the ground.

"Give it back, if even one gets ruined, Luna's going to murder me!" I crouched and picked up the stick of holly. Tori opened the box and removed one of the magazines.

"Luna says that these are all her favourites," Tori said as she looked through the box. Daphne leaned over and peered into it as well.

"Hey, she has every issue from the past two years in here!"

"I suppose they're all her favourite then," I said. Ulster reached over and plucked one out. He moseyed over to an ottoman and sat down. I stared at the three Slytherins holding various copies of Luna's magazine.

"Good Lord, there's a cult," I breathed. Just then, louder voices sounded in the entrance hall. I turned around, recognizing them. Vincent Crabbe, Gregory Goyle, and Draco Malfoy, entered their common room. Upon seeing me, the new prefect nearly fainted.

"Hey, fellows," I greeted waving.

“Potter!” Malfoy howled. “What in Slytherin’s good name are you doing here?”

“Chilling,” I replied blandly, scratching my temple with my wand.

AN: I'm guessing you want conflict, so... I promise more 'plot' next chapter.

The chapter to come is tentatively titled: Adonais.

Peace,

-Frack

Chapter XIV: 528

"Problem solved," I mumbled to myself. My sleeve dabbed at my lip, but on the black material of my robes I couldn't see if it was bleeding or not. And worse, if I had been cut, what would happen if Malfoy's saliva had entered the wound? Would I get rabies? Do purebloods get vaccinations? The little ferret had been hysterical. I touched my finger to my mouth and brought it away; there was no trace of blood. My gaze fell on my other hand. Inside lay Malfoy's prefect badge. My lip throbbed. I scoured the halls for a mirror. The closest thing I could find though was the silver frame of a painting that was hung near a custodial closet. I lit my wand with a whispered word and held it below the frame. I stared hard at my reflection. My lip wasn't cut, but it was a little swollen. Other than that, I looked as dapper as ever.

"Nox," I muttered, turning around. "Now I can sleep soundly." Bedtime really sounded nice. I turned down the hall that would lead me to the marble staircase, but thoughts of rest vanished as the badge slid around uncomfortably in my hand. I frowned. My hand opened and I stared the silver pin. You know, I didn't really want it now. My frown deepened.

Where could I put it? Where would Malfoy be the least inclined to look? My pocket was the easy answer, but what if the bastard decided to feel me up tomorrow? Muttering such things to myself, I crossed the empty space to the staircase. The prefects wouldn't be out on the first night back. In fact, the Head Boy and his counterpart wouldn't be patrolling until much later. That left me free to roam the school unmolested. Inspiration struck me. I sped up the stairs and headed in the direction of the Muggle Studies classroom.

After riding the blasted moving staircase multiple times, I arrived outside my destination. I hadn't ever been to the Muggle Studies room, and I'll be damned if Malfoy had either. I entered the room, the door opened near the teacher's desk, and looked around for someplace to hide the badge. The desk wasn't an option. I'm sure that whoever taught this class was an upstanding sort of person and would return the pin upon finding it. My eyes locked onto a row of cubbies that lined the back wall of the room. Stealing over, I crouched and rifled through them. They were filled with various muggle trifles: a

few toasters, digital watches, cigarettes, light switches, et al. I'm sure no one would notice a small silver badge nestled among the all the styles of light switches ever created. I stuck my arm into that particular cubby and dropped the badge at the very back. I stood up, brushed the dust off of my pants, and exited the room with a final look around.

"Ok, now problem solved."

"Jupiter," I grumbled to portrait of a rather large lady in a pink dress. She didn't respond. It figured, considering her eyes were closed. I leaned closer and placed my lips near where her painted ear was nestled among the curls of her dark hair.

"Jupiter!"

She snorted in her sleep and turned about, exposing her other ear. I shook the painting and yelled the password again. She awoke with a similar yell. I let go of the portrait and waited for her to open up. She didn't.

"Password?" The Fat Lady asked after a moment. I groaned. She blinked at me owlishly then tossed her hair.

"I've said it three times already," I said. The Lady huffed and squinted at me.

"Well then once more wouldn't hurt any."

"You know, it's barely eleven, what were you doing asleep anyway?"

"Well, Potter, some of us need our beauty sleep. You know looks like mine don't come withou—"

"Jupiter. Jupiter. Jupiter. A simple 'I was tired' would have sufficed," I said, nearly ripping the portrait off of the wall in my haste to get through the porthole. I had the distinct feeling that she would talk like that for a while otherwise.

“Well, you asked,” she called after me. I made a face that was not at all pleasant.

“It’s called being polite. Maybe I should give up trying...” The portrait swung shut, blocking out the Fat Lady’s voice, and leaving me in the Gryffindor common room. I was unsurprised to note that it was nearly empty. The only people present were, a seventh year couple cuddling in one of the armchairs near the fire, what looked to be three first years playing poker, and one or two people that had fallen asleep on the couches. Where the Slytherin common room had been all greens and browns, its Gryffindor counterpart was decorated in scarlet and purple and dull gold. Squashy armchairs ringed the circular room, along with a few writing desks and a smattering of couches. All the furniture was worn, and gave the room a distinct comforting feel.

I leered at the couple on the chair, ruffled the first years’ hair and kicked Katie Bell’s shin. The girl jumped up and looked at me. I tapped my watch and pointed to the clock that actually showed the time. She nodded slowly and yawned.

“Thanks, Harry. Nice to see you again.” She stood up.

“Likewise, I figured you should get to bed before the house elves throw you in with the trash.” She glared at me.

“Accidentally?” I offered. She punched my shoulder and headed for the girls’ dormitories. I looked at the other person on the couch. It was a small boy who, I assume, had fallen asleep watching the poker game. Pointing to the large clock above the fireplace, I nudged one of the players with my foot.

“You’ve got ‘til twelve, then get to sleep. Don’t forget to wake your buddy.” They looked up at me, nodded, and returned to their game. My mouth twisted. At least they were cultivating a good gambling habit.... I lifted my glasses and rubbed at my eyes.

“Smacky the Frog says to prevent wildfires,” I muttered to them and headed for the stairs. “There, my conscience is sated.”

I pushed the door the fifth year boys' dormitory open and stepped through, closing it behind me. With a whisper and prod of my wand, the candles were lit. The rest of the crew had already arrived, changed, and gotten into bed. Upon my arrival, however, they sat up. At least most of them did. Dean Thomas, Seamus Finnigan, and Neville were now looking at me. Ron was out, just like the lights had been moments earlier.

"It's just Harry," Dean said to the others. The boy replaced his wand on his nightstand. Neville nodded, let go of the quilt he was clutching to his chest, and put his cactus back on the side table, but Seamus kept his eyes fixed on me as I made for my bed. My trunk was at the foot of the bed, and Hedwig's empty cage stood on my nightstand. I stared back at the Irish boy. He flinched and looked away.

"What's up?" I asked, lifting my eyebrows. My hands found the lock to my trunk and undid the clasps. I flipped the top up and pulled a set of pajamas out. Seamus shrugged and lay back down in his bed. I shifted my gaze to Dean, expecting an explanation. He looked at his best friends' form, and then turned back to me.

"His mother didn't want him to come back," Dean said quietly. I paused with my robes half off.

"No?" Dean nodded. I looked at Seamus; he wasn't pretending to be asleep.

"I suppose he asked you to tell me that he thinks I'm a loon, then?" Dean didn't respond. Seamus sat up quickly.

"It's just that the Prophet..." He fell silent, not sure how to call me crazy to my face. After a moment he started again.

"Me mam, you know, is sort of... er, she thinks Dumbledore is finally losing it, you know with all the things that have happened since... well, in the last few years." So I was just a minor matter compared to the Headmaster's lunacy. I nodded at him, pulling on my nightshirt.

“It’s cool. I just never thought you were one to let your mother tell you what to believe, Seamus.” Neville was staring back and forth between me and the Irishman now.

“It’s not just my mother; there are a lot of people—”

“People,” I cut in. “People, in general, are idiots.” Seamus’ face reddened.

“Are you calling my mother an idiot?” I took off my pants and added them to the pile of discarded clothes.

“If you include her in the category of ‘people,’ then yeah, sure, your mother is an idiot.” There was no hostility in my voice, at least not intentionally. Seamus seemed to realise that as well.

“I dunno, man.... Listen, I know it’s late, but what did happen with the last task and all?” He asked, seemingly eager and nervous at the same time. Neville perked up, and Dean leaned forward as well. I stepped into my shorts and closed my trunk. I couldn’t help but think that they had been waiting up for this. My gaze locked onto each of them in turn. I let out a heavy sigh. It wouldn’t hurt any to tell them.

“Well, once upon... what date was it?” I asked, unsure. They shrugged, staring at each other stunned that I was actually going to explain.

“Hmm, anyway, once upon that date, there was a Triwizard Tournament. It happened to be the Third and Final Task of the ridiculous game, and the extraordinary wizard, Harry Potter, defeater of mermen, charmer of women, and most humble man in the galaxy at large, was about to win the bleeding thing. When all of a sudden, Harry Potter, most spectacular dueler and dragon racer, was whisked, along with his rival, Cedric Diggory, yes, the man himself, to a remote and desolate graveyard riddled with perils,” I began, sitting upon my bed. I’d added unintentional emphasis on ‘riddled.’ My mouth twinged, but I decided to continue. Seamus’ brow was creased, Neville was listening, enthralled and Dean was smiling slightly at my embellishments.

“And so, transported to this mysterious and eerie graveland—er, graveyard, they were faced with an unfortunate decision. To ‘splore or not to ‘splore. Coming to a quick decision, they chose not to explore. But, but before they could manage to escape, C-Cedric, the man, was struck down by an evil lizard thing held aloft by a rat-like man called Peter Pettigrew. The bastard had been helping the lizard-like creature, who in truth was Lord Voldemort, to return to his humanesque form.” I paused in my story; I’d nearly choked on Cedric’s name. I shook my head and looked up again. My voice lost its nearly singsong quality.

“After a ritual, which is too terrible for words or memory, the Dark Lord was given the cloak of man-flesh once more. Now he called on Wormtail—Peter, and by use of the Dark Mark on the scum’s arm, summoned his Death Eaters. After taking a brief head count, Lord Voldemort tried to do away with the heroic Harry Potter. Now Harry, furious that he had been used to such ends, fought the Dark Lord in a duel that will most likely never be recorded, but honestly, it was pretty spectacular. In the end, the Boy-Who-Lived for fourteen years escaped with his life and brought back the gallant Diggory’s body,” I concluded. “And I suppose you know what happened after that.”

There was silence in the room for a good five minutes.

“That’s what happened,” Seamus said after he had processed everything. “That?”

“Hey, believe what you want. It’s easier to go over when I make it ridiculous like that. The fact remains, the Ministry and its newspaper of choice doesn’t want to believe that the Dark Lord is back, or that people that have been ‘upstanding’ members of their society are actually murdering henchmen ready to do his bidding.”

“But why?” Dean asked.

“Because they’re a bunch of yellow cowards,” Neville piped up suddenly. We all turned to look at him. His cheeks flushed. “So my gran says. She believes Harry and Dumbledore.”

“Good for her, Neville, but what about you?” I asked.

"Y-you do seem a bit out there sometimes, Harry," he said quietly, staring at my face. "I still believe you, though."

"Me too," Dean added. "You don't have any reason to lie to us. Plus the story was rather good." I grinned.

"I still don't know," Seamus said. "I mean, you show up here nearly halfway through the night, your mouth is swollen, and Ron's sister said you were hanging around a Slytherin."

"What, are you the substitute prefect while Ron's asleep?" I asked. "Do you set curfew now that I'm a nutcase?"

"It's freakin' weird is all I'm saying, Potter."

"Weird how? I can show up here whenever I feel like it; I live here just like you guys. As for the Slytherins, I didn't even know they were Slytherins when I met them," I replied, holding up my index finger. "You can't just dump friends once you make them, especially if they're attractive females."

"That doesn't explain your face, mate," Dean said.

"I was forced to smack a bitch," I replied, crawling into bed. "Who knew that the bitch would smack me right back?" I shut off the lamp above my nightstand. "G'night to the lot of you." After a round of similar replies, the lights were extinguished.

I took a long, warm shower the following morning, dressed, grabbed my schoolbag, and hurried down to the Great Hall for breakfast. I didn't bother to wait for Ron, Hermione, or anyone else.

The bad weather of the night before had apparently carried over to today, or so the ceiling of the Hall said (visually, not literally). Stormy grey clouds roiled about over head, looking as though they would burst and soak everyone at any given moment. My eyes instinctively moved along the staff table. Dumbledore wasn't present, and neither were McGonagall or Flitwick. Umbridge was nibbling on what looked to be a grapefruit on a fork. It was unpeeled. Nothing more interesting

was going on up there, so I stared on, fascinated by Umbridge's eating habits. After a bit, I grew hungry myself and sat down, grabbed up a plate, and loaded my breakfast onto it. Soon, Ron and Neville joined me, and a moment later, Hermione and Ginny stepped into the Hall.

"So, have you gotten your schedule yet?" Neville asked once he had finished his toast.

"Negative, Admiral. McGonagall is rather slow," I replied. Neville looked down the length of the table and saw that the professor was slowly moving towards us, rolls of parchment tucked under her arms. Upon reaching us, she simply handed us the schedules with a muttered greeting and forged on. After looking at his schedule, Ron spit the food he had steadily been devouring out of his mouth.

"Bloody hell, look at today!"

Neville looked over at the scroll, sighed, and put his head down. I set my glass of orange juice down and looked at my schedule.

"History with the Ravenclaws, Double Potions with the Slytherins, Divination, and Double Defense with the Slytherins. I see your point, but look at it this way. First day of class is bound to be better than having Trelawney, Binns, and Umbridge when they've gotten used to teaching again. Snape's already out for my blood, which makes no difference there."

"What d'you think he's got planned for us?" Neville asked, sitting up and sloppily downing a glass of water. He was only a bit nervous.

"It's quite simple Neville, he'll try to kill us and if it succeeds he'll blame it on Ron's lack of potion making skill," I said trying to cheer him up. Ron chuckled, causing his food to slip off of his fork.

"Well," a new voice said, "what's so funny over here?" I glanced over my shoulder and saw the tall form of Angelina Johnson standing behind me.

“Nothing much, just thinking of ways Snape can get off of murder charges,” I told her. “What’s up?”

“Ok then,” she muttered. “Tryouts for a new Keeper, Friday. I want the entire team present.” With that said she moved off to harangue George and Fred who were up to something at the far end of the table. I frowned. Oliver Wood had been gone for a year already, but with the tournament last year I hadn’t the time to notice.

“Maybe I should write to Wood. Do you think he was scouting out Keepers for when he left?” I asked. Neville shrugged. Hermione nodded as her mouth was full. Ron just stared blankly at the bacon tray.

“Hey, what’s this?” Neville asked pointing to his schedule. “I never signed up for, um, Wizarding Anatomy and Health Studies.” I peered at the section of parchment his finger was on. My eyebrows rose.

“Wow, and here I thought I’d have to learn about sex through methodical practice and visual examination.”

“Lemme see that,” Ron said, perking up instantly. He grabbed Neville’s schedule and looked at the brief description of the class. Unfurling his own schedule, he combed it to see when he would have the class.

“I don’t have it,” he said, looking up.

“It’s because you’re not mature enough yet, Ron,” Hermione cut in.

“I am too,” the boy replied, jabbing his fork at her. I looked at my own schedule. Where the health class had been on Neville’s, a Wizarding Public Service class was on mine.

“I’ve got some public service bullshit here,” I said. Hermione, who was now looking at her own schedule, dropped it and grabbed at mine. I jerked it away from her.

“Let me see!” She demanded.

“Why, what do you have?” I laid the parchment on the table.

“Textile Production,” she replied quickly swapping her schedule with mine.

As my experience with Professor Binns’ History of Magic class has gone, we really haven’t covered much on the history of magicking. The ghost of a man was, as he always was, hovering by his desk staring at a piece of parchment that said ‘Course Goals’ on it. Other than those two words, the sheet was blank. He couldn’t actually write or anything so he taught from memory. Ron, Hermione, and I were the first ones to enter the classroom. I sat in the very last seat in the center column. Ron sat next to me, while Hermione sat right up in front of the Professor’s desk. I half expected her to produce a shiny red apple and offer it to him. Of course if she did, Binns’ couldn’t actually pick it up, or eat it.

“Alright, I see we have a large class here,” Binns’ began once everyone had filled the seats, “and this is your fourth year, correct?” He glanced down at the blank course outline and looked up again.

“That means we will be covering the histories of the gob—yes, dear?” Hermione had nearly speared the poor ghost with her raised hand.

“It’s our fifth year, Professor,” she told him slowly. Binns did a double take. He looked at the course outline again.

“It says here though that...” He paused and adjusted his ethereal spectacles. “Oh! Yes, yes, you are quite correct Miss...” He glanced at Hermione.

“Granger,” she replied.

“And what house are you in?”

“Gryffindor.”

“Alright then, five points to Gryffindor,” the Professor said. “Starting today we will be covering the Giant Wars, note that despite the name

the wars were quite small compared the soldiers themselves.” I chuckled. He had my attention for once.

“And as this is your O.W.L. year, I will be implementing a group study method on top of my usual lecture. I would like you all to break up into groups of four. Get to it, while I find a good place to begin.” My eyebrows disappeared into my hair.

“I call Hermione,” I shouted as soon as Binns looked down. The Gryffindor half of the class glared at me.

“What?” I added. “Maybe you guys should be quicker.” Hermione herself glared at me, but approached us. Ron was still stunned.

“Did he say group work?” the befuddled redhead asked. I nodded.

“That’s what I thought. Oi, Hermione!”

“I’m right here,” the girl replied from beside him. “That makes three, who’s going to be the fourth member of our group?” I looked about the room. Neville was struggling to find a group he could fit into. I waved him over with a smile.

“Neville,” I said. Hermione looked at me over the bridge of her nose.

“Neville?”

“Yes, Hermione?” the boy asked as he sat down.

“Oh, never mind.”

After a few minutes Binns’ looked up and began his lecture. When the bell rang signaling the end of class, I was the sixth one out of the door. Ron and Hermione followed.

“We’ve got fifteen minutes,” Hermione said pushing to the fore and turning to face the two of us. “Where do you want to go?”

“To bed,” I mumbled with a yawn, and turned down a side hall. Hermione huffed something and followed me along with Ron. I took

the hall down to the end and stared at the tapestry that was on the right side of the wall. I turned and stared at the one that was on the left wall. They were both the same.

"Left, left, right, I believe it was," I said to myself, lifting the leftmost length of cloth and opening the door that was behind it.

"What's in there?" Ron asked.

"I can't recall. I think it's another door though," I replied without looking at him. Inside, the room was lit by four torches near each of the four doors. I again chose the leftmost one and walked towards it. Ron and Hermione stuck close to me.

"What the hell are you afraid of?"

"I am not afraid," Hermione said, nearly stepping on the bottom of my robes as she tried to get through the door before Ron. As we entered the other room, I stepped aside. Hermione looked up at me.

"What, you wanted to lead? Go ahead." She opened her mouth to reply, but Ron came stumbling through, white as a sheet, and knocked her over.

"Sp-Spi-Spider!" he gasped. I held my hand up near the torch that was beside the door.

"B-Bu-Bunny!" I exclaimed, showing him my shadow puppet. I moved my fingers to make it look like the rabbit was chewing. His cheeks reddened. Hermione sat up and pulled her wand out. My brow creased.

"No spellwork in here, Hermione." The girl looked at me, furious.

"Why not?"

"Do you want to end up where we ought not to end up? Because it is quite likely to happen if you confuse the room." She looked about the room suspiciously, but tucked her wand away.

“Shame on you,” Ron said to her. “If you were running from Harry’s bloody clown and knocked me over, I wouldn’t even think to curse you.” Hermione stood, brushed herself off, and elbowed Ron in the gut.

“Don’t mention the clown.”

“I wouldn’t have if you weren’t seconds away from turning me into something unnatural!”

“Oh please, the only unnatural thing I could have turned you into is an actual human!”

“Time’s a’ wasting,” I called and opened the door on the right. The two prefects bickered for a moment longer and then hurried after me.

The door led to a flight of stairs, which we took down to another flight of stairs, and so on, until I was certain that we had reached the level of the dungeons. Making another right turn, I pulled open an extremely dry wooden door.

“Well, what do you know, it worked.” I smiled to myself. Hermione and Ron stepped through and stared at the iron ladder that was before us.

“Uh, Harry, where are we?” Ron asked, scouring the area for spiders.

“Under Snape’s storage closet,” I replied and started up the ladder.

“You led us all the way down here to get to Potions quicker?” Hermione said, stunned. I nodded and looked down at them.

“At this rate, we’ll barely make it in time. I suggest you get climbing.” I pushed on the wooden panel that was above me and heard the thin stone slab that was on top of it shift. I applied more force, and the lid of the trapdoor popped off. I pulled myself out and waited for my idiot companions to follow. Ron hurried up the ladder and out of the hole in the floor. Hermione came last.

“You are the limit, Harry Potter,” the curly haired girl puffed as she climbed up. I fit the top back on the hole and brushed some dust into

the creases of the stone. There, it looked like it had never been moved. I turned and opened the door, allowing my companions to exit before me. We stepped out into the Snape's Potions room, and as I should have expected, the greasy Death Eater was not at all present. He was probably waiting to make a grand entrance and then pretend that he wasn't looking for attention.

"Look, Hermione, we're first the first ones in. Aren't you happy?" I smirked as she left us in order to get her cauldron unloaded.

"Really, Harry, why did you make us come that way?" Ron asked as we went to get our own workstations set up.

"It's raining outside, Ron." I hauled my pewter pot over to a table on the very right side of the room, and went back to fetch my ingredients and tools. People began to file into the classroom. Dropping my toolkit on the table, I finished explaining to Ron.

"Why would I waste the time to trek in a near full circle, when ducking down a few secret passages would suffice?"

Ron nodded. "Good point."

"That's what I thought, until you two idiots came with me." I left enough space for one more person to fit at the table, and turned about to look at the door and the mix of Gryffindors and Slytherins coming through it. Ron turned with me.

"Who're we waiting for, Neville?" he asked, rubbing his chin.

"No, Daphne."

"Who's that?"

"Her," I muttered jerking my head toward where the Slytherin girl had just entered she was among the last few people to cross the threshold.

Ron frowned. "She's wearing Slytherin colours, mate. Did you realize that? Oh, wait, she's... she's that other girl's sister isn't she?" I

nodded and waved to her. She flashed me a smile, while putting her things into her cauldron, and hauled it over to us.

"I told you I'd get it, and I did," I said gesturing to the table. She smiled widely and set her things down atop the table. She then reached up and pulled her hair back into a loose ponytail.

"Amazing, d'you mind telling me how?"

"It's a secret."

"Fine, just don't expect me to help you with whatever horribly complicated potion Snape decides to toss our way," she said, crossing her arms over her chest. I laughed.

"Who says I want your help?"

Ron whispered in my ear, none too subtly, that we definitely did want her help. I held up my hand and leaned towards Daphne.

"Your sister says you're no better at potions than I am, and if you haven't noticed, I'm not terribly useful when it comes to mixing volatile concoctions. Thanks for playing, come again."

"Do you want to fight, Potter?" she muttered, leaning in closer. "I'll give you a real bruise, not that pansy blow Malfoy knocked you yesterday."

"You fought Malfoy!" Ron yelled from behind me. Said ferret-lad whimpered. I ignored them in favor of the girl that was mere centimeters in front of my face.

"My uncle told me not to hit girls," I said, "but when have I ever listened to him?"

"You're a wizard, there's no need for hitting," she breathed, pulling her slender light-colored wand out. I drew mine, quickly taking a step away from her.

"Potter," a certain grease ridden man said quietly from behind me. "Fifteen points from Gryffindor for picking a fight, and with a girl no less." I spun quickly, laying my wand on my desk.

"Good morning, Professor Snape. I am delighted, as always, to see your sunny face in this dank and grubby classroom." The class was caught between the urge to laugh or tremble.

"That's another five points for being an ass," the man sneered. "Just sit down."

"Why yes, sir," I said, dropping into my chair. I hid my face behind my cauldron and glowered at Daphne. "You knew he was there, didn't you?" The girl's mouth twitched.

"So what if I did?"

"I'll get you back, just wait."

"Potter, five more points for continuing to harass Miss Greengrass. Do I need to send you to see Professor McGonagall already?"

"No sir," I replied, peeking over my cauldron. The man stared at me hard for a few seconds longer before starting on his annual, 'I only have endure-insert time period here- more of you imbeciles' speech. This time it was only one year more, thankfully. He told us of his expectations, which fewer than half the class would meet, and of the requirements to take N.E.W.T. level Potions.

"Only and only if you score Outstanding on the Potions section of the O.W.L. exam will you be admitted into my N.E.W.T class, which means that a fair few of you will certainly be saying your farewells," Snape said softly. He looked at Neville, Ron, and I in particular. "So, in order to prepare you for this grueling test, we will be concocting a potion today that is often tested during the Ordinary Wizarding Level examination: the Draught of Peace. As its name implies, it calms the nerves and soothes agitation. Being too liberal with any of the ingredients may very well put the drinker into a deep and sometimes fatal sleep. Pay close attention to what you are doing, begin!" Snape jabbed his wand at the board, and the instructions for the potion

appeared on it. I took off my glasses, cleaned them, and stuck them back on my face.

“Well, time to survive,” I muttered. Ron grunted in agreement and began to fiddle with his cauldron. On my other side, Daphne began to neatly lay out all the required ingredients before squinting up at the board. The potion was a terribly complicated, nitpicky job that required the maker to monitor the brew at almost all times. This was a problem, as I could barely manage my own mind a quarter of the time.

When only twelve minutes were remaining in the class, Snape began to walk around, criticizing and correcting where he saw fit. He said nothing about Hermione’s potion which was almost exactly like the example on his desk, but he did turn up his nose at Neville’s attempt and added three drops of something into Lavender’s cauldron. When he reached our table, Snape paused, and I could have sworn he rubbed his hands together gleefully before circling our workspace a few times.

“Weasley,” the man said. “How much of the powdered moonstone did you put into this?” Ron’s potion looked mostly fine, except that it was spitting blue and green sparks continually.

“A few measures,” Ron said, and then added, “Professor.”

“And what did you use to measure?” Snape said looking at Ron’s jumbled array of cups, beakers, ladles, and caps.

“This,” Ron said, pointing to the cup measure. Snape frowned.

“You realize, Weasley, that if this potion had even condensed in your throat, or heaven forbid inside, Potter or Miss Greengrass, that you would be asleep for a week at the least.” He snatched up a flagon collected some of Ron’s potion inside.

“You could calm a birthing dragon with this.” Ron allowed himself a small smile. Snape scowled and vanished the rest of the potion.

“That is not a good thing, however, you pass. Clean up.” Ron scrambled over the sink in corner and began to wash out his utensils. Snape rounded on me.

“Let’s see what we have here, Potter.” I moved back so that he could stare at my potion. It wasn’t nearly as good as Hermione’s, but it looked to be at least passing. Snape’s eyes darted over to Daphne’s potion that was identical to my own. He glanced back and forth for a bit before, I assume, coming to the conclusion that he couldn’t fail me and pass Daphne without it being wholly unfair.

“Bottle it. You as well, Greengrass.” Throwing one last dirty look at my cauldron, he swept off to the table behind us. I turned to Daphne, who had looked my way as well.

“Thanks,” we both muttered at the same time. I blinked.

“What’re you thanking me for?” I asked. Daphne stood up and gathered the things she had used, putting the unused things back.

“You helped me to get a decent, if not good, grade on that thing,” she said moving a bit of hair out of her eyes. “That’s worth some thanks, I suppose.”

“And I thought you snakes were an ungrateful lot,” I said, smiling. She scowled at me. I gathered up what I had to wash as well as her used wares and headed to the sink.

“You can clean up the rest,” I told her, “as thanks.”

“Bastard,” she grumbled, tossing my things haphazardly into my supply box.

After breakfast, the Great Hall never held the entire student body at one time, unless there was some sort of special occasion or feast. Lunches and dinners were spread across a few periods, some eating earlier or later depending on how their schedules were structured. Usually that meant that all fifth years ate with the fourth years, first and second years ate with the sixth years, and third years ate with those in their final year at Hogwarts. Or something like that.

I think.

“So, where’re you going after lunch?” I asked Daphne as we entered the Hall and headed for the Gryffindor table. This ‘we,’ included Ron, Hermione, Daphne, Neville, and I.

“Runes,” she answered, digging around in her bag. “You?”

“Divination,” I replied. “I don’t think it’ll be that bad, though.”

“It’ll be horrendous,” Ron called from in front of us. He was hurrying so that he’d have enough time to eat. The youngest of the Weasley boys dropped himself on the bench and squinted up at me. “How can you even say that?”

I shrugged, taking a seat beside him. “There aren’t a lot of things that bother me anymore.”

“So it seems,” he said. “Just don’t turn into Parvati or Lavender on me.”

“I’ll try.” Ron gave me a look that I couldn’t figure out, and pulled an entire roasted Cornish hen onto his plate.

“You were in my Ancient Runes class last year, as well,” Hermione said to Daphne after pulling her eyes away from the spectacle that was Ron Weasley eating. The Slytherin girl nodded and sat next to me after a moment of debate.

“You were the only one that wouldn’t shut up and let the man teach us,” she said pulling food onto a plate for herself. Hermione’s cheeks flushed. I giggled into my glass.

“What?” Daphne asked, pausing, her fork centimeters away from her lips.

“Nothing,” I mumbled, my laughter trying to escape as Hermione blushed harder. “Nothing at all.”

“Hmm,” she said, and stared at her fork. Finding nothing amiss she poked me with it. “Really, Harry, what’s so funny?”

“Little Miss Prefect’s social insecurity,” I said.

“I am not!” Hermione barked. Neville coughed into his drink as Hermione pushed him in order to lean forward. She pulled her wand out and pointed it at my chest.

“I’m not socially insecure.”

“Violence is a natural reaction when one doesn’t know how to properly react, Hermione,” I said sagely, leaning away from her. She sat down and speared a baby carrot with her fork. I winced internally.

“Insecure isn’t the same as inept, Harry,” she said through gritted teeth.

“Yes, yes, and there’s no way you’re going to get the food into your mouth with your jaw set like that,” I replied. “I must have hit a nerve.” Neville tried to stifle his laughter with a piece of bread. Tried to. He spit whole wheat all over himself and burst out laughing. I looked at Hermione.

“Nothing can be that funny unless there’s a bit of truth in the joke.”

“Harry Potter, you are—”

“—the limit, I know,” I finished, looking at Daphne. “She’s the most predictable person I know.” She raised an eyebrow and pushed a small plate over to me. On the plate was a sandwich.

“Is that sandwich for me?” I asked, staring at it. I picked it up and took a bite. “Thank you.”

“Not a problem, you looked busy,” she said a smile tugging at her mouth. I stared at the sandwich and then to her.

“You didn’t poison it, did you?”

“With what?”

“I dunno, poison?”

“No, Harry, I didn’t poison you,” she said and reached for the half eaten sandwich. “I’ll have it back if you don’t want it.” I jerked it away from her.

“Hey, I was just confirming, is all. No need to deprive me of nourishment.” I lifted the sandwich to eye level and stared at it for a moment. “It does need something though.”

“What?” Daphne said, her brows creasing as she constructed another sandwich. I rubbed my chin and took another bite. I chewed slowly, savoring the various tastes.

“Mustard,” I said finally. “It needs mustard.”

“Here you go, Harry,” Ginny said as she sat down on Hermione’s left side. I stared at the proffered jar and then the ginger-haired girl that held it. Her cheeks reddened. I snorted and took the mustard. Ginny wouldn’t dare poison me.

“Where’d you come from,” I muttered, opening the sandwich and putting the mustard on. I passed the jar to Daphne. “Here you go.”

“I’m fine,” she replied and gave the jar back to Ginny. “I’m Daphne.”

“Ginny,” the littlest Weasley replied. “Um, nice to meet you.”

“Likewise,” Daphne said before tearing into her sandwich. Ron looked up from eviscerating the chicken.

“She’s, er—Tori, right? Yeah, Tori’s older sister,” he said. “The small one from the train, you know.” Ginny glanced at Daphne again, and picking up on the resemblance, nodded mutely. I bit my fingers.

“Ouch,” I muttered. “Fuck that hurts.” Daphne snickered.

“Why’d you do that?”

“Bloody well thought they were food, didn’t you mate?” Ron cut in. “I do it all the time, don’t worry.” I grimaced.

“Gee, Ron, I want to cultivate table manners just like you, don’t I?”

“Hey, I like food.”

“And I like my fingers right where they are,” I said. “I use them to touch things and stuff. They’d be no use in my stomach.”

“You know, Harry,” Neville said. “You would get them back eventually.”

“Thank you, Neville, I think I’m finished here.” I stood up and wiggled my fingers. “Yeah, see you.”

“Oi, wait up,” Ron called, ripping the leg off of another roast hen and following me. “I’ll come with you.”

Divination was surprisingly dull; Trelawney didn’t even make one prediction of my gruesome death, but restricted herself to handing out textbooks and journals. We were going to study dreams. Ron realised that I had been lying to Hermione on the night of the welcoming feast, but didn’t press me on the matter of my dreams. I wouldn’t have responded anyway. After class, he and I trekked about the upper floors until break was over. We then headed for Defense, not knowing what exactly to expect from Umbridge. Well, Ron anyway. I actually had a pretty good idea of what was to come, which was confirmed the moment I entered the room.

“Christ above, welcome to Hell, Ron.”

“I’ll say. We can’t drop this class, can we?”

“I wouldn’t be here if we could.” The room that had weathered through years of changing professors had suffered another change. In place of the three man tables we used to have, individual desks had been brought in. Around the room various Ministry of Magic paraphernalia was set up, ranging from busts of old politicians to

posters and buttons with Fudge's winking image plastered on them. And what's more, a statue of a kitten that was much bigger than a kitten ought to be was perched on the teacher's desk, behind which sat Undersecretary Umbridge. Ron scouted out a seat and sat down. The class was nearly full, and we looked odd coming in moments before the bell rang, but not one of the students turned to look at him as he squeezed himself in next to Hermione. I traipsed down the center aisle and approached an empty desk that was next to Neville.

"What goin' on?" I asked, laying the back of my hand on his forehead as I approached. "No fever. Has she eaten your brains?"

"Um, I don't think so," he said after a moment. I frowned.

"Well, try to think. If you can't, then she has."

"Will do. Wait, what?"

"Exactly," I murmured. I glanced at Umbridge. No reaction. I waved at her.

"Good afternoon, Ms. Umbridge." The toad-looking woman stared at me, a smile stretching slowly across her face. I nearly shivered.

"That's 'Professor Umbridge,' Mr. Potter," she said sweetly. "Take a seat, please."

"Not bloody likely," I muttered.

"What?" she said sharply.

"Nothing, marm," I replied, dropping my bag on the desk next to Neville's. I sat down and looked about the room. Malfoy was sitting in the very back, trying to avoid notice. My frown deepened. If she had Malfoy cowed, that indicated a problem. Daphne sat up near the front, and was shooting me a confused look. I waved at her and turned to Neville.

"You lot arrived early, didn't you?" He nodded.

“Damn, I must’ve missed the memo.”

“Yes, you must have,” Umbridge said suddenly. She stood up and walked around the desk. “Now that all of us are present, I believe I can start.” I leaned back and prepared myself for the lecture. She plucked her wand up from her desk and flicked it at the blackboard. Words that I couldn’t be bothered to read appeared instantly. Umbridge cleared her throat and turned to face the class as a whole.

“I fear, that upon looking over what this class has been taught, we must return to the most basic principles of Defense Against the Dark Arts. The various teachers that have had the pleasure of instructing you children have not followed the Ministry approved method. I am here to correct that. We will be adhering to a carefully researched and Ministry approved theory-based course of defensive magic study. The goals of this course are listed on the board. It would be wise to copy them down.” I didn’t even bother to retrieve my supplies from my bag. My dissent went unnoticed though, as every other soul in the room began to furiously take down the words written on the blackboard.

“I trust you all have a copy of Wilbert Slinkhard’s Defensive Magical Theory?” Umbridge asked once they had finished. I pulled the book out of my book bag.

“Yep, and I mine’s signed as well,” I replied, as the class droned out ‘Yes, Professor Umbridge.’ The woman’s eyes snapped onto me.

“Really? By the author?” She asked, surprised. I shook my head.

“No, by Ms. Blot of Flourish and Blot’s, we’re pen pals,” I said. Umbridge frowned.

“Was that supposed to be funny, Mr. Potter?”

“Yes,” I replied.

“Well then, I suggest you conserve your humour for after class,” she said. “Turn to page five and begin to silently read the first chapter.”

“Villains never laugh at my jokes,” I whispered to Neville. “Not one.” He stared at me for a moment, unsure of what to say. Finding nothing, he opened his book and stared at page five. I opened my book, held it up in front of me and looked around the room. Nearly everyone was staring at their book, trying to stomach Slinkhard’s material. Everyone except for Hermione. Her hand was up, and she was staring resolutely at Umbridge.

“Mr. Potter?” Umbridge inquired. I peered over my book. The toad-like woman’s eyebrows were raised.

“What?” I asked.

“Is there a problem?”

“I don’t have a problem, but Hermione does, I think.” She glanced at Hermione briefly before turning back to me.

“If there is no problem, then I suppose you could read just like everyone else is, Mr. Potter.”

“The thing is, marm,” I said, lowering the book a bit. “I’m different.”

“Yes, I suppose you are,” she said smiling again. I didn’t think it was meant to be nice.

“I’d better return to reading then, if that’s all,” I said and raised Defensive Magical Theory so that it covered my face. Umbridge let out a breathy sigh and called on Hermione.

“Yes, Miss...”

“Granger, Hermione Granger,” Hermione said. “I have a question, Professor.”

“About the reading, dear?” Umbridge asked, that sick sweetness leaking into her voice.

“No, about your course goals,” Hermione answered. “I’ve them thoroughly and—”

"All of them?" I interjected, staring at the girl bewildered.

"There are only three, Harry," Hermione said looking away from Umbridge. I glanced at the board.

"Oh, I didn't read them," I muttered. "That must be why." Neville choked on his laughter.

"Your question, Miss Granger?" Umbridge asked. She glanced at me. "Mr. Potter, raise your hand before speaking, please."

"There's nothing about practical application of spells, nor any mention of using them during class," Hermione said quickly, as if the words were going to run away from her.

"Miss Granger, I cannot fathom a situation arising during class that would warrant the use of defensive spellwork." I stuck my hand in the air.

"Mr. Potter?" Umbridge called.

"What if I were to pretend to be an orangutan and chase Hermione about the room, would that warrant the use of defensive spells?" She stared at me for a good minute and a half before asking, "Are you quite serious, Mr. Potter?"

"Of course I am, if class is going to go like this everyday I might get bored," I answered, staring at the shocked faces of everyone in the room. "Or not."

"Alright then, Mr. Potter, I forbid you from pretending to be an orangutan," Umbridge said. "Yes, Miss Granger?"

"Shouldn't we be prepared for our exam? I know there's a practical portion on it. What are we to do then?" The room began to hum with the whispers of the class. I suppose they realised that they could fail the O.W.L. without proper instruction.

“Quiet,” Umbridge sang. “If we cover the theory thoroughly, none of you should have any problem during any examination you might encounter.” The room buzzed louder.

“But what about when we leave school,” Daphne said suddenly. “Won’t we need the knowledge then? I’ve used what we’ve learned before loads of times at home, Professor.” Umbridge spun and faced the Slytherin girl.

“Name, dear?”

“Daphne Greengrass.”

“While I am sure charms and transfigurations may be useful in a domestic setting, I rather doubt you will need counter curses and anti-jinxes at home, Miss Greengrass. And hand up next time.”

“Well, what about when we’ve graduated,” Seamus said from where he was situated in the back; his hand was already up. “What if our jobs require defensive spells and such?”

“Cross your fingers and hope she’s gone by June, mate,” I called back to him. “That’s what I’m doing.” This time the class did laugh.

“Mr. Potter, one more outburst and it will be detention” Umbridge said. “As for your question Mr....”

“Seamus Finnigan,” Seamus said.

“As I’ve mentioned before, Mr. Finnigan, I have seen that your previous teachers have fooled you with the notion that such spells are needed in the outside world. The truth is that they are not. It astounds me that such people were allowed to sew lies into your heads. Why, apparently last year illegal curse were not only shown to you, but performed upon you!” I raised my hand.

“Yes, Mr. Potter?”

“Honestly, we all learned better from a convicted Death Eater than anyone else, barring the werewolf. I mean, if you can hold me under

the Imperius half as long as Crouch did, I'll hug you of my own accord," I said. "Can you say that our grades will improve with your method of tell, but not show?"

"My method?" Umbridge breathed. "This method was approved by a group of Ministry officials that are educational experts, Mr. Potter."

"I'm sure, though, that these 'experts' were not taught by these methods themselves," I shot back. "Where is your proof? This is Britain's only magic school, and unless I am mistaken, Undersecretary, this is the first time a Ministry official has taken a teaching post at Hogwarts."

"You are not mistaken," Umbridge said, her smile vanished. "This is the first time a Ministry official has been appointed a teaching position, and it is Professor Umbridge, Mr. Potter."

"That would be acknowledging you as part of Hogwarts, Ms. Umbridge," I said. "Whereas I'm quite sure you will be gone come next September."

"Detention, Mr. Potter," Umbridge said softly turning around and sitting at her desk. "Tomorrow evening, in my office. Be there."

"With bells on, marm," I said blandly. My job was done; I leaned back and began to read.

"Chapter one," Umbridge called over the uproar that had begun in the classroom, "page five, 'Basics for Beginners.' "

Next Chapter: Blame it on Bad Luck.

Detention, Draco, and Dobby. How's that for alliteration. -_-

Chapter XV: Blame it on Bad Luck

"The only thing worse than being a mudblood is not knowing your blood at all," I murmured to myself. My gaze fell on the serpent emblazoned on my prefect badge. "I must have noble blood."

The Hogwarts library was empty at this time of night. The librarian was in her bed, but just to make sure she wouldn't interfere with my research, a simple sleeping potion that I'd lifted from dear old Horace's potions rack ensured that I was safe until sunup. My eyes darted from shelf to shelf taking in the expanse of the great room. There was no humanly possible way I could look through everything in only six hours. I looked down at my timepiece and frowned.

"Or rather, five hours and twenty-eight minutes," I whispered. "I'd better hurry." The Trophy Room held no mention of a Tom Riddle, or Thomas Riddle, as I assumed my father's full name had been. In fact there was no mention of any sort of Riddle. So I was forced to assume my father and his family had not been the outstanding sort. I stood up from where I was seated and made for the large leather-bound tome that stood near the librarian's desk. The ledger held the names of all the Head Boys and Girls past, as well as all the prefects. When I opened the book I wasn't surprised to note that the text was minuscule, maybe a few hundred names were squashed onto a single page. My mouth bent. It just goes to show how insignificant an individual was really was. Pulling the book off of its stand, I hauled it to a table and began to look through it backwards.

With a mere twenty minutes left until I had to get to breakfast, I came to a conclusion. No one by the name of Riddle, save me, had been prefect in the last two hundred years. The same for Head Boy or Girl. I shut the book and returned it to where it belonged. My eyes traced the high ceiling, as if I could ask the heavens to get me out of the shit that I was in.

"Not bloody likely," I muttered, snatching up my schoolbag and heading for the Great Hall. Perhaps I should have listened to Dippet. Women always cause trouble when trouble is all you're trying to avoid. My pace slowed from trot to stroll as I rounded the last corner to enter the entrance hall. My eyes clapped onto the tall form ahead of me.

“Oi, Tom—”

“Oi, Dobby!” I called as I ducked into the kitchens. House Elves were running this way and that, hurrying to get more food to the House tables above.

“Dobby,” I called again. “Winky!” The eccentric elf and his somewhat less insane counterpart were nowhere to be found. All the elves were wearing the same Hogwarts pillowcase; none were dressed in the odd manner that was unique to Dobby. I grabbed one of them by its large head as it tried to hurry past me. “Are you busy?” The elf tried to nod.

“No? Alright then, would you mind getting me some sw—”

“Harry Potter has come looking for Dobby!” A strangely clad elf shrieked as he attached himself to me. “Oh, sir, this is too much for poor Dobby, only the first day back at Hogwarts and Harry Potter has come looking for him.”

“Yes, yes, oh woe is you, Dobby,” Winky’s voice called from behind me. “Get off of him!” I spun, Dobby still attached me, and looked at the other elf.

“What’s up, Winky?” She squeaked and looked up at me, her huge eyes widening.

“The ceiling is up, sir,” she said. I blinked.

“Alright then,” I muttered. I patted Dobby’s head and pulled him off of me. The little elf snatched up the tea cozy that had fallen off of his head.

“Yes, Harry Potter? What can Dobby do for you?” he asked bowing low so that his long nose scraped the ground.

“Do you guys have sweet and sour sauce?” An unsure look came over his face as he stood straight.

“Winky, is we having sweet and sour sauce?” Dobby whispered leaning away from me.

“No,” Winky replied blandly.

“Go find some!” Dobby hissed and glanced back up at me, smiling widely. “Winky is going to fetch it, Harry Potter.” My eyebrows rose as Winky trundled off grumbling and waving her small hands about in front of her.

“Things aren’t going well for her, eh Dobby?” Dobby nodded sadly.

“Winky isn’t feeling much better, even though Dobby tries to cheer her up. Dobby even bought Winky a nice elf-sized dress for her birthday, sir. Winky takes it and chokes Dobby with the dress!” he exclaimed. He cast his eyes down. “Winky still likes to drink herself stupid, as well.”

“Nothing you can do about the dress, Dobby,” I told him, “but you can tie Winky up and not allow her to drink, I suppose. Or at least hide the butterbeer.”

“But then she will strangle Dobby,” Dobby said fearfully. I shook my head. Winky had the little guy whipped.

“Well what have you been up to then, Dobby? Besides trying to fix Winky.”

“Oh! Dobby has taken up reading the newspaper, sir. But they is making much fun of Harry Potter. Dobby is wanting to hurt them, so after he reads it, Dobby strangles the Prophet!” He wrung his hands and after a moment motioned for me to come down to his level. “Dobby is also putting peanuts in Professor Snape’s evening soup! Professor Snape is allergic to peanuts, sir.” I snorted, then coughed, then fell onto my ass and began laughing. After a moment Dobby joined in as well.

“Keep doing that, Dobby,” I gasped out. “For my sake.”

Dobby giggled harder and nodded his large head.

“Dobby!” Winky shrieked. “Get off of the ground!” Dobby stopped abruptly and hopped up. Wiping the smile off of my face, I stood as well. Winky had returned with another House Elf that was much smaller than the other elves. The small elf had a jar of translucent orange sweet and sour sauce.

“Here you go, sir,” the elf said, and glanced at Winky. “Well back to work, be seeing you later, Winky!” Winky’s pale skin flushed.

“Bye-bye, Ric.”

“So there’s a Ric, huh,” I muttered, staring at Dobby who was visibly restraining himself from jumping on the smaller elf.

“Yes, sir,” Dobby grumbled as Ric disappeared into the crowd of other hard working House-Elves. Dobby rubbed his nose and looked up at me. “Does Harry Potter think that Father Christmas will bring Dobby a bear trap?”

“I’ll see what—I mean, maybe, you’ll have to write a letter or something.”

Dobby grinned and went looking for paper, whilst Winky hurried off to do more of whatever she did at dinner time.

As fast as rumors circulate in this school, they didn’t circulate fast enough. I entered the Hall for dinner and only half of the room stared at me I as strode down the center aisle and sat next to Ron. He slid me a plate of fried chicken.

“Just like you asked, mate,” he said. I thanked him, set the sauce on the table, and rubbed my hands together. Ron eyed it and tapped my shoulder.

“What’s that?” I opened the jar and poured the sweet and sour sauce liberally on the plate.

“This, Ron, is sweet and sour sauce,” I answered. “Want some?” He nodded rapidly and slid me his plate.

“And where did you get that?” Hermione asked.

“You know,” I said leaning across the table, “in the dungeons, where I do the bulk of my drug trafficking and such.” She sighed and returned to her food. Shrugging, Ron and I continued to eat.

“I can’t handle this anymore,” Hermione groaned after a few minutes had passed. “What’s happened to you?”

“Me? Nothing much,” I said, dipping the chicken into the sauce. “I’m aiming to amuse myself more than anything at this point.... Say, how’s everyone taking the whole Umbridge thing?”

“It’s terrible,” Ron said, “everyone thinks you’re crazy or something. Crazier than before, anyway.” He shrugged and continued ripped into his dinner roll. “At least they don’t like that Umbridge woman now.”

“Thanks for that, Ron,” I said shaking my head. “They know she’s from the Ministry for sure now. Even if Umbridge is rather good at advertising it herself, she didn’t outright say anything about her position.”

“As if her room was concealing anything,” Hermione said. “No one can walk in there and not realise immediately.”

“The same way I should have realised that you were a bossy little know-it-all the moment you barged your way into our compartment on the Express?”

“Yes, kind of like—hey!” Her cheeks grew red. I nudged Ron ‘discreetly’ and tilted my head.

“Isn’t she darling?” Ron was about to answer but seeing Hermione’s frown deepen; he found a shred of intelligence and didn’t say anything about it.

“Erm... do you plan on getting started on all our work once we get back to the common room?” he asked instead. I paused, the chicken halfway to my mouth. We had a reading from Binns, and essay from

Snape on the usefulness of mouse lichen in potions, dream journals from Trelawney, and more reading from Umbridge.... A grin spread across my face. I set my food down and slid my plate towards Hermione.

"Do you want to see something funny-ish?" I asked them, pulling out Slinkhard's Defensive Magical Theory. Hermione looked up from my food and furrowed her brows.

"In that thing?" Nodding, I turned to the dedication page and pointed to the last thing on the rather large list. Ron and Hermione leaned over and read, Hermione reading it aloud.

"...and finally to my darling wife, Dolores, the new Undersecretary to our Minister! Without you I wouldn't be half the person I am today...." Ron choked on his bread as Hermione trailed off. The bushy-headed girl's eyes were wide. She checked the publishing date on the book, just as I had earlier. 1993 May. Hermione stared at me disbelievingly.

"She's married?" My smile stretched wider.

"Poor bloke," Ron muttered.

"She's married?" Hermione repeated.

"Yup."

"That explains her enthusiasm," she said.

"Yup," I said again. "I'm thinking of asking Slinkhard for a list of her pet peeves."

"Do it," Ron said immediately. "She'd go crazy in a week."

"Less, if I do it proper," I replied.

"Do what proper?" A pair of voices chorused from behind me. It was Fred and George. Weren't they supposed to be in class or something? I tilted my head back and stared up at George (he had a goatee).

"Annoy Umbridge," I said. George frowned and exchanged looks with his brother.

"Pranks? Without us? For shame, Harry. For shame."

"Aren't you two supposed to be in class?" Ron asked. "Not that I'll tell anyone or anything," he added at the twin glowers that were directed his way. "Not a soul, you just keep on doing what you like...."

"Thanks little bro," Fred said, his glare disappeared as if it hadn't even existed. "Anyway Harry, we just dropped by to tell you to expect work tonight. We've rounded up a batch of testers." I frowned.

"I was going to bullshit my dream journal tonight, guys."

"Well the bullshitting will have to wait. We've got willing, fearless, first years that have no idea what they've signed up for," George said.

"Unless you'd like to give up your position?" Fred asked. "In which case we'd have to obliviate you."

"Try it," I said. "I'd turn the pair of you into Lockharts, jr."

"That is key, mate, 'pair,' there are two of us and only one of you," Fred said. "I think."

"Fine, fine, I'll do it. What'd you guys prepare?"

Fred looked at Hermione pointedly, "crackers and cheese."

"Just you wait," Hermione began, "if it's anything illegal or immoral, I'll get McGonagall on you!"

"Dear Hermione," George said. "We've got Harry for a reason. We pay him to be immoral. If a galleon told him that you liked to be dropped from great heights, he'd drop you from bloody great heights. Isn't that right, Harry?"

“Boredom would also be a fitting reason, guys,” I replied. “Besides, I only accept payment in the form of virgins, remember?”

“Yes, yes, Ginny is all yours,” Fred said gently. He patted my shoulder and plucked a roll from the center of the table. “Lord knows she’s been waiting long enough.”

“That’s the best you can offer, Ginny? Can I trade?” I said.

“She’s all we’ve got,” George said. “Deal with it.”

“If you want something you have to get it yourself,” I sighed. “I’ll take the money then.”

“Ok then,” Fred replied. “If Hermione decides to tell on us, I expect you know what to do, right?”

“Hide the body and direct the police to the nearest Dress Barn?”

“We don’t have police here, Harry. But do hide the body,” Fred muttered.

“Ok, so hide the body in the Dress Barn?”

“We don’t have those either,” George said. “Put it the dungeons somewhere.”

“Would you please stop talking about me like I’m already dead!” Hermione exclaimed.

“No,” Fred, George, and I said at roughly the same time.

The twins stuck around for a bit more, before heading off to prepare whatever they had to prepare for testing. The first and second years, as well the twins themselves, had dinner next so it all worked out. I was to watch the station they would set up while they were eating. Ron and I could start on our homework then. I cleaned my plate off and left. Ron and Hermione followed.

“Harry,” Hermione called as they caught up to me in the entrance hall. I paused at the marble staircase and waited for them. As we ascended, Ron bitched about all the work we’d have this year, and how the twins were right when they told him that fifth year was going to be a ‘troll’ of a year. I supposed that meant big and nasty-like. We reached the common room just as George exited it. Fred followed shortly and tossed me the Marauder’s Map with a brief, “thanks.”

“Did you let them into your trunk?” Ron asked. I shook my head.

“Remind me to invest in a really big padlock next Hogsmeade weekend.”

“Couldn’t they just open it with magic?” Hermione asked.

“Fine, a combination lock then. I doubt magic is smart enough to figure out my password.”

“Don’t doubt the magic, mate,” Ron muttered. “That’s dangerous thinking....”

“...I’m just going to finish up he-here,” I said with a yawn as Ron left for the dormitory. He nodded sleepily and staggered up the stairs. My tired eyes landed on my dream journal that was now half-full with the nonsensical ramblings of my supposed subconscious. Yeah, sure. Hermione had trundled off to bed, her arms laden with course books, an hour earlier. She hadn’t tried to conceal her happiness at my newfound drive for homework. Apparently that was one thing she wasn’t going to be tired of me doing. I yawned again and put my face on the desk. My eyelids drooped. My mind slowed.

“No,” I grumbled, my lips pressed against the warm wooden table. “Must. Dream. More.” I giggled once and lapsed into sleep.

The strange dream began so subtly that I almost didn’t realize it was a dream until one fact became clear. I wasn’t tired. Was that normal for a dream?

I sat in a squashy armchair the colour of sage. There was no reason to get up, none at all, but I rose anyway and slipped through a dark

green door and then into a dimly lit hall. My robes swished against my corduroy trousers, my hand lifted of its own accord and ran itself through my hair, pushing it back. Eyes traced the stone walls, dull orange in the light of torches. My feet carried me to my unknown destination, pausing here, speeding up there, turning around a few times. When at last I saw a pair of double doors, my hand, again of its own accord, stretched out towards it. My fingertips brushed the gold knob of the left door, but suddenly pulled away. I started down the hall again. After making two left turns, a smaller door came into view. My wand was drawn, and unlocked the door. I hadn't to say a word. My left hand disappeared into the pocket of my robes and withdrew a vial of bright purple liquid. My wand flashed forward again and flicked to the left. The door whispered open.

I walked through it, my feet stepping lightly. Inside, the room was dark, but with the light from the hall I could just make out the form of a young woman sleeping soundly on a small bed near the wall. I padded over to her. My hand stretched out and turned her head. I ran my wand along her bottom lip and lifted my arm. Her mouth opened. My right hand flicked out quickly, my thumb uncorking the vial. I dumped the contents down her throat and ran my wand along the length of her neck and upper chest stopping where her breasts began. My fingers brushed her hair and turned her head back the way it had originally been set. I turned to the door and pushed it shut.

Now I lifted my wand and lit it. The light wasn't the usual artificial white light, but looked as if actual rays from the sun were spilling from the tip. The wood grew warm within my grasp. My body, my head turned, my eyes darted around the room coming to rest again on the woman. In the light I could see that she was pretty, her skin a healthy tone, her mouth pert, even in sleep. Her hair was the colour of fresh cut wheat. My hand reached out and moved it away from her neck. My fingers found a slim silver chain clasped around it. I lifted it and felt my lips twitch away from my teeth in a smirk. A key was hanging from the necklace. My thumb ran along the chain and undid the clasp. I took the key and slipped out a door that was near the bed. I closed it and immediately looked around.

My perplexity peaked. I stood in the librarian's enclosure of Hogwarts' library. I exited area of the librarian's desk and lit the sconce. My

wand stayed there for a moment longer and I felt a jolt run through my arm as the sconces around the large room were all set alight. My feet beat a strong path to the locked restricted section. Unlocking it, I threw my hands up into the air. My hand ran itself through my hair again. I turned around and returned to the librarian's enclosure. I rummaged through the bits and pieces that cluttered the desk, finally plucking a scrap of parchment from the mess. It read, Shadowed Past: Research, in neat handwriting, and then below that 27b for T. Riddle—denied, in larger script. T. Riddle? My hands loosed the scrap and allowed it to float onto the mess. I turned and, in the mirror behind the desk, saw myself. How could I have not noticed before?

The teen that stared back at me was not Harry Potter. He was tall, taller than I was. His skin wasn't exactly pale, but it was much lighter than my own unevenly tanned skin. He was built thin, whereas my own frame was losing its frailty and becoming more solid and sturdy. Tom Riddle's face was handsome, there was no denying that. His grey un-spectacled eyes were sharp and intelligent, and his eyebrows thin but strong. Riddle's dark hair was messy and pushed back. But at least it stayed flat...

Silly me, I had thought this was only a dream.

I tried to shake my head, but nothing happened. Riddle's gaze was fixed on his hair, and therefore so was mine. We ran a hand through it and turned about. Our mouth bent in a frown. Yeah, our. Although I was just along for the ride, it felt as though I was currently living what Riddle was living. Had lived, whatever. When he frowned, I felt as though I frowned. It was strange, but at least the confusion was done with. I think that our minds were only things that were separate. At least I think I think. I tried to grin, but the frown lingered. Other dreams that had been forced through my scar hadn't been as long or as vivid as this one. Did that mean that things were worsening?

I was jerked from my thoughts as our feet pulled us back to the restricted section. The long-fingered hands of Tom Riddle ran from bookcase to bookcase looking at numbers and letters. When we came to twenty seven, we turned right. Eyes darted this way and that, following, noting, remembering. Shadowed Past sat on its shelf, nearly a centimeter of dust on it. Hands reached out and pulled it

from its place. The key was drawn again and the book's chain unlocked. Then Tom Riddle and I sank down onto the ground. We cracked open the book, one finger running down the table of contents.

"Riddle," Tom's voice whispered. "Riddle, Riddle, Slytherin, anything." His voice didn't hold the malicious undertone it held as Lord Voldemort. Riddle sounded desperate and eager all at the same time and to be honest, so was I. Hair fell forward obscuring our view as we pored over the book. We lifted one hand and pushed it back in order to read the miniscule writing, but there was no mention of Riddle.

Of course there wasn't. It struck me then, that he didn't yet know that his father was a muggle. He was looking for traces of his family. Sympathy for Tom Riddle welled up in me, our chest felt suddenly tight, but for different reasons.

"Slytherin then," he murmured, desperate, "Slytherin has to be here...." And it was. One hand flipped the pages, and then when we had gone too far, flipped back. Our hands were shaking. Eyes traced the page slowly, taking in the account of the family, but they didn't linger long. Influences, properties, none of them seemed to matter to Riddle. We continued at a swift pace, taking in bits and pieces of what the pages contained. Finally, we came to a family tree. Our eyes focused on the page, tracing history. Slytherin, Gryffindor, Rough, Dun, Macduff, Wexler, Killigan, and onward it continued until it reached I. Gaunt. I looked at every name trying to figure out where his wizard blood may have come from. I. Gaunt had two sons, no daughters, so his mother couldn't have been from that family. The family Moraine had seven children, three of them daughters, but they would be much too old to have been Riddle's mother. There were no connections I could make. Half of the names and lines on the tree didn't have dates. It was severely obsolete. Dropping our head into our hands, we stared at the pages, lost. I can't track how long we sat like that, my mind trying to process what was going on.

We sat up when we felt vibration in the pocket of our pants. Our hand delved in at an awkward angle and plucked out a worn gold pocket watch. It was nearly five in the morning. Our head turned. Pale light had begun to stream through the high windows. We shut the book, put it back, and redid the chain. Our feet led us back to the entrance

of the restricted section. We locked up and returned to the librarian's room, pausing to replace the necklace on the librarian before we headed out.

The hallways weren't yet alive, but we hurried down, down, down. Being in the dungeons calmed us, our pace slowed. We approached the Slytherin common room slowly, and when we reached the expanse of wall that served as an entrance, we whispered, "open," in the language of snakes.

The Slytherins were mostly still asleep. A few boys who looked to be seventh years, unshaven, their uniforms under their arms, headed for the washroom and waved sleepily to us on their way. We sighed, rubbed at our eyes, and made for the armchair we'd vacated earlier last night.

That's when she jumped us. A girl, shorter than Tom Riddle by a head, grabbed our arm. Her hair was blonde, her face pretty. Her mouth, her lips, set nicely. Her eyes were a bright shade of blue that shone nearly green in the torch and candlelight. Above all, she was way too awake for this time of day. The girl's grip was strong, stronger than I'd have expected. Riddle knew her better, though. Almost...snakelike, he wriggled out of her grasp. She rounded on us, but instead of attacking or yelling as I would have predicted, stepped up close to Riddle and placed her mouth on his. Her lips were soft and faintly moist. We flinched away, surprised.

"Emma," Tom's voice said. "What are you doing?" She stared up at us, tilting her head back.

"Am I wrong then, Tom?" Riddle didn't say anything. I got the impression that he didn't know what to say.

"I thought so," she grumbled, grabbing the front of our robes and pulled us toward her. I felt our eyes widen and our hand twitch at being grabbed. I waited for Riddle to hex her to pieces. He didn't. Her arms slid their way around us, Riddle fidgeted as she pressed her mouth against ours again. After a longer kiss she pulled away, her face curious. Tom caught himself as she leaned in again.

“Emma, we’re in the middle of the—” He was cut off. Her mouth found ours again, her tongue pressed between our lips, feeling. We opened in surprise. Our eyes closed in pleasure. She pushed us back into what felt like an armchair. The same armchair we had been in previously....

I awoke. My lips and tongue were pressed against the warm, and now damp, wood of the desk. My inkwell had been knocked over staining the red carpet black. I wiped my mouth with my sleeve. What a dream. Thing. Whatever. I rubbed at my temples and sat up.

“Damn,” I muttered. “Voldemort’s girlfriend was hot.”

The weather cleared up the next morning and for once I wasn’t a bit grumpy or tired when I woke up after only four hours of sleep. I was curious. After I had showered and dressed, I made my way down to the Hall for breakfast, where, much to my glee, the entire hall stared at me. I rubbed my chest and smiled broadly to all. Most didn’t smile back. I scowled at them, grabbed up some breakfast, and headed off to the library for a bit of, um, reliving.

Madam Pince had just unlocked the door and was returning to her desk. She frowned at me.

“What?” I asked. “You should be delighted that I’m here so early, lady.”

“Food, Mr. Potter, is not tolerated here no matter how early you are,” Madam Pince replied. I frowned and stared at my hands.

“Want a doughnut?”

“No thank you, Mr. Potter,” Madam Pince answered. “But if you do, then please eat it outside.” I frowned. Doughnuts or investigation? Or both! I crammed the food into my mouth and wiped my paws on my robes.

“How ‘bout now?” I asked, only it came out unintelligibly. Madam Pince turned up her nose and produced her wand. With a flick and swish she cleaned my robes and my face.

"Don't vomit in here, Potter," she sighed and returned to her desk. I grinned the best I could and chewed my food.

The library was empty save for me and Madam Pince. Shadowed Past had to have been updated or something by now. I was curious to find out Voldemort's lineage. He had said nothing of them at any of our 'meetings.' If fifty years ago the chamber of secrets had been opened by Riddle, then I would need a copy that was dated to at least then, or somewhere around there.

I approached the restricted section and followed the numbering as I had the night before. Turning in where Shadowed Past had been, I cast my eyes around remembering things from the dream. The same books were in the same places, each having the same relative amount of dust on them as they did during the dream. I grunted.

"They must be really unpopular." I stopped where the book was supposed to be and scratched my head. It was missing. I stuck my hand into the empty space that was there, reaching all the way to the back. Nothing. I brought my face close and glared at the vacancy. "Where're you hiding?"

Much to my dismay, it didn't answer.

"Then again, I suppose if books could talk there wouldn't be much use to them being books," I mumbled to myself, pulling my face away from the dusty shelves. Giving up on finding it, I exited the restricted section and sat at a table. Sunlight was beginning to pour in through the high windows, casting skewed quadrangles of light in patches here and there. I raked a hand through my hair and approached Madam Pince. I hate asking for help.

"Do you have a copy of Shadowed Past, preferably one that was updated somewhere in the last fifty years?" I asked quickly. She looked up from writing some thing and moved over to a card catalog. She shook her head.

"No we do not, Mr. Potter," Madam Pince answered. "I believe our copy of that volume went missing long ago. No order was put in for a

new one. Why do you need it?" She turned around and plucked a sheet of parchment and grabbed up her quill. I glanced at the sheet.

"You're going to order it?" I asked. Madam Pince nodded.

"If you need a book and my library doesn't have it, I will make sure I get it," she said firmly. My eyebrows rose. She was passionate.

"Uh," I began, thinking of a reason other than, 'I need to find Lord Voldemort's mommy.' "Research?" Madam Pince noted that down, wrote the title of the book, the year in which I wanted the version to be and signed her name.

"Do you know the author?" she asked. I shook my head.

"Very well," she said, waving her wand over the document in order to dry the ink. Madam Pince grabbed up an envelope, slid the parchment inside, and sealed it.

"I suspect that you're finished here then, Mr. Potter," she said handing me the envelope. "If you can head up the owls and send this now, the book will be here before the end of the week. I'm afraid I won't have time to send it out myself." I nodded and accepted the order form.

"Oh, I've got just one more question," I said. "Were you here around fifty years ago?" Madam Pince glared at me.

"No, Mr. Potter," she said. "I haven't been here that long yet."

"If I can ask, who was your predecessor?"

"Anna Martin," she said. "Why?"

"Nothing," I muttered more to myself than to her. I inclined my head to her. "See you, then."

"Goodbye, Mr. Potter."

The owlery was empty that morning, of people anyway. I tied the letter to a sleepy Hedwig's leg and tossed her out of the window.

"Wakey, wakey," I called after her. Her hooted angrily at me as she caught herself, but took off. I turned away from the window and made for the exit. On my way out I caught a glimpse of an owl that I realised belonged to Malfoy staring after Hedwig dejectedly. I approached it, suspicious.

"Stay away from my owl, mate," I grumbled poking at its eye. The owl blinked and hooted at me. I lifted its wing and looked it over. It hooted again.

"Can't you say anything else," I muttered. Malfoy's owl again hooted in response.

"I'll take that as a 'no' then." I ruffled the dark plumage and flicked its beak. After inspecting the Slytherin's owl, I came to a strange conclusion.

"You're a girl," I said, my eyebrows disappearing into my hair. The grey owl blinked sadly. I interpreted that as a nod.

"Hedwig is gay...? That's messed up!" I backed away from Malfoy's owl. She hooted again and hopped towards me, looking for comfort. I turned tail and slouched away from my owl's, um, 'friend.'

My schedule for today went something like this: Double Charms the Hufflepuffs, History with the Ravenclaws, Herbology, and Wizarding Public Service to end the day. I rubbed at my chin. That means that I could only sleep through History. The last time I slept during Herbology, something leafy bit my ass.

Charms went the way it usually did, quickly. Flitwick, actually knowing how to properly teach, made class as simple as possible while teaching us what was necessary. Today, being the first day back, class went smoothly. The little man outlined what he was going to cover before O.W.L. exams and what he might have time to add in if we moved quickly. That was the first half of class anyway. The latter half of class was spent refining and improving (or at least trying to

refine in Ron's case) the summoning, measuring, and banishing charms that we learned the previous year. Seeing as I had effectively worked out everything he told us practicing for the tournament last year, I didn't have too much to do but smack people with the pillows he was letting us use to practice. After he caught me trying to suffocate Neville for the third time, Flitwick asked me to start on silencing charms. Reluctantly, I opened the new charms book and read the section on silencing. Hermione was only a bit upset that, despite my pissing Flitwick off, the professor had advised me to move ahead, whereas she was still trying to catch his eye.

"Suck it, Hermione," I muttered out of the corner of my mouth. Realising what that implied, I choked. "...actually don't, please."

"I didn't plan to," she said tightly. She banished a box of books, narrowly missing the professor's head.

"Uh, Hermione," Ron piped up, "I don't think he's going to like you any better if you send him to Pomphrey."

"Be quiet, Ron."

Despite the skies not being overcast, the steps and walkways outside the castle were still wet. Ron, Hermione, Neville and I were walking towards greenhouse five, where our Herbology class for today would be held. I couldn't remember having class in this one. We'd exited from a set of double doors near the Great Hall and had nearly reached the greenhouse compound when my bag was cut open and my supplies thrown about on the wet grass.

"Who the hell," I yelled, whirling around my wand already in my hand. I glared at Neville, who was standing behind me. He stuttered something and dashed around me in order to hide behind Hermione. Now that he'd moved, I saw Daphne and a few other Slytherin girls approaching us. I slapped a smile on my face and concealed my wand up my sleeve.

"At least that got your attention," she puffed when they caught up to us. The other girls stared at her queerly and continued on towards the

greenhouse. "I was thinking I'd have to get my shirt ripped open again, or something like that."

"Is that an offer?" I asked. I'd take it, no doubt. Her cheeks pinked a little and she stepped back.

"No," she said slowly. "But you can walk with me to Herbology."

"Hey, we're going to Herbology," Ron said.

"So am I," Daphne replied. I reached towards my bag to pull out my schedule and disprove that, but wait, Daphne had cut a perfectly good schoolbag open and dumped all of my things on the wet grass. I pulled my hand back.

"Daphne, pick up my stuff," I said.

"Way to be blunt," Hermione muttered.

"Sorry?" Daphne asked, sticking out her bottom lip.

"Pick. Up. My. Things," I said, leaning closer with each word. She scowled and pushed me back.

"You do it." I grabbed her around the waist and pointed to where my books, notes, rolls of parchment, quills, pens, and ink were scattered about on the lawn.

"You did it," I muttered, "so you should clean it up."

"Fair point," she replied. "But you didn't stop when I called the first fifteen or so times. You deserved it."

"Who are you, my wife? I was thinking at the time," I said, "thinking about very important things. Besides, no one else heard you." Neville peeped out from behind Hermione.

"Um, I did."

“Cap it, Neville, you’re ruining my credibility,” I hissed. Daphne snickered and pulled away from me.

“Yeah, sure,” she grinned. “Fine, I’ll do it.” She pulled her wand summoned my things one by one. I frowned at her.

“You upset me,” I told her. I pointed at my face. “See? Sad face.”

“Why?” she asked, “I got your stuff.”

“Yeah, but you didn’t manually pick them up so I didn’t get to see up your skirt....”

“Harry!” Hermione hissed. Daphne’s cheeks reddened more than I’d seen so far. She elbowed me. Hard. Rubbing at my side, I repaired my bag.

“What,” I muttered to myself. “It was a good plan.”

“Foolproof even,” Hermione added, “oh wai—”

“I hate you,” I said, heading off to butcher some plant life. “I’m going to kill something and pretend it’s you. I’m going to kill it really, really slowly.” Daphne, overcoming her shock, followed me, a glare set on her face.

“Pervert,” she grumbled. I shrugged.

“Like I’ve said before, I’m a teenage boy. I’m allowed to be an idiot,” I said. “Forgive me?” I tried to look sad. Daphne’s mouth twisted as she thought on it.

“Fine. You’re forgiven,” she said. “But there are limits you know, Harry.”

“What are those?” I asked, grinning.

“Ah screw it,” she said. “I suppose that’s the reason I’m hanging around you in the first place.”

“Because I have no limits or because I’m a pervert?” I asked.

“Neither,” she said, bumping me with her shoulder. “You’re fascinating. Amusing even.”

“Yeah, I plan to be a clown once I off Voldemort,” I said with a snort. “Call me, I’ll do parties.” Daphne flinched.

“Don’t say his name!” she exclaimed.

“Who? Voldemort?”

“Yes!”

“Why not?” I asked, folding my arms across my chest.

“Because!” she replied, her cheeks pale.

“Because you’re scared? Deal with it.”

“You’re an ass,” she said, elbowing me again. “You just don’t say his name. It’s not done.”

“Dumbledore says it,” I replied.

“Yeah well we’re all not Albus Dumbledore,” she said, brushing her hair back. “He’s actually fought Dark Lords before. He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named is afraid of him.”

“Oh and who did I fight, Riddle’s little sister?” I asked, glaring at her. We reached the greenhouse compound. I opened the gate and allowed her to enter before me.

“Who’s Riddle?” she asked. I held the gate open for Ron and the others before answering.

“That’s his real name,” I said. She choked.

“Don’t say that one either!”

"You're a big baby," I muttered, nudging her forward. "A big scaredy baby."

"I am not," she grumbled. "I value my life, that's all."

"He hasn't managed to kill me yet, so I suppose I can do what I want."

"It's that kind of thinking that will get you killed," she said softly, her eyes locking onto mine. I sighed.

"Fine, I won't say it when I'm near you," I mumbled.

"Good."

"I'll call him Jimmy instead," I said as Daphne opened the door to greenhouse six. Shaking her head, she closed the door behind her. But at least she was smiling.

"I take it you didn't kill anything?" Daphne said with a smirk as we walked to dinner. I stared at my bandaged hands and then back to her.

"Plants with teeth have survived this long for a reason, Daphne," I said. "If you try to strangle them when the teacher's gone, they bite you." Daphne snickered.

"I'm sure."

"That's what you get for taking your anger out on a living creature," Hermione huffed. I glared at her. The room for Hermione and Daphne's textile class was across the hall from Wizarding Public Service.

"Oh really?" I asked. "Then why didn't you help me, a living creature, when the thing was chewing on my hands? Weren't you angry at me?"

"Don't be a baby," she said. "It wasn't that bad."

“Curse her for me, Daphne,” I whispered to the girl on my right.
“Something nasty.”

“Why me?”

“I can’t use my wand,” I mumbled.

“What?” she asked.

“I can’t use my wand.” I said. “The bandages.” Hermione made a happy sound.

“Shut up,” I said. “You’re just glad I can’t outshine you in class anymore.”

“Oh please, I’m the one that helped you with those spells,” she said.

“Curse her now?” I pleaded to dark haired girl beside me. “Please.”

“Petrificus Totalus,” Daphne incanted, suppressing a giggle at Hermione’s shocked face.

“That’s the nastiest you can do?” I muttered.

“Beggars can’t be choosers,” Daphne grumbled. “Do you want to join her?”

“I’m good.”

“Ok.”

“Hermione,” I said pacing around the girl’s petrified form. “Didn’t your parents ever tell you that your face would get stuck like that one day?” She couldn’t say anything. I giggled.

“I love you, Daphne,” I said, looking over my shoulder at her. “Wait here; I’ll go get the plant that bit me.”

"We're in the middle of the hall, Harry. Shouldn't we move her somewhere else?" the Slytherin girl asked, clearly trying to hold back her amusement. I rubbed at my chin.

"Good point. Drag her over to a closet or something."

"Potter," Snape's voice called from behind us. "What are you doing?"
Shit. He was probably coming up for dinner.

"Daphne, time to cut our losses and run. Snape can have Hermione."

"Don't even think it," Snape warned.

"I already have," I answered, facing him and backing away.
"Daphne?" She backed away with me, leaving Hermione between the Potions master and us.

"How about this, you keep Hermione as an ornament or something, and let us go?" Snape sneered.

"Why would I want Granger?"

"She's smart?"

"You forget, Potter, that she knows nothing that I don't know already," the greasy man said as he reached Hermione's form.

"She's, um, pretty?" I offered backing away some more.

"We have different opinions in that regard, Mr. Potter," he said staring down the prefect. Hermione struggled.

"She can cook!" Snape's eyebrows rose.

"She can?"

"She's a woman, isn't she?"

"True, true," he muttered.

“Harry?” Daphne asked from beside me. I glanced at her.

“What?” Daphne pulled me around to face her and jammed her knee into my stomach. Snape winced. I collapsed against the wall.

“Fuck,” I panted. “What was that for?”

“Making fun of women,” she said plainly. “No hard feelings.”

“Hey, you try bargaining with only Hermione as currency,” I said, standing up shakily. Daphne looked at the downed prefect.

“Point taken,” she mumbled.

“Good, now apologise,” I said.

“No.”

“If you two are done with your spat,” Snape said, “I think I’ll refuse the offer. Ten points from Gryffindor for assaulting your own prefect and five points to Slytherin for disciplining Potter.” Daphne grinned and thanked her head of House.

“Not a problem, Miss Greengrass, and Potter I’d be thanking her. She just saved you from detention with me,” Snape replied, a creepy smile on his face.

“If she hits me again, can you cancel my detention with Umbridge?” Snape’s eyes locked onto mine.

“What?”

“I have detention with Umbridge later,” I said. “If Daphne hits me can you cancel it? C’mon you know you want to see me in pain.” Snape was still staring at me.

“What did you do?” he asked, his voice sharp.

“I told her that her methods were ridiculous and that she wouldn’t last the year. So how about it?”

"I see. Do not mention the Dark Lord when you are near that woman, Potter," he said quietly. "You know where she comes from, what's she's out to do."

"Yeah, the Ministry, she's trying to interfere with what's going on here," I said. He glanced at both Hermione and Daphne.

"Much more than just interfering, Potter," Snape said.

"The Ministry can't touch Hogwarts, it's a private school," I said.

"Not yet, they can't," he muttered. He didn't want to say anything in front of Daphne and Hermione.

"So how was Prague?" I asked. Snape took a step back.

"What?"

"Prague, you went there. How was it?" I repeated.

"How did you—"

"Malfoy," I said.

"Nonsense, Draco was not there," Snape said.

"Sorry, my mistake, Malfoy senior," I corrected. "The not-so-whiny one."

"I see," Snape said looking at the girls again. "Do you think it wise to discuss that now?"

"It was a convention, right?" I asked, ignoring his previous statement. Snape nodded once.

"Thought as much," I muttered. "So what happened, bar fight?" I gestured to my chest, where the man had been injured.

"You could say that," Snape muttered. "There were... discussions that did not go as planned."

"Hmm," I muttered. "Tom was there?" Snape flinched hard. I'd never seen that before. If there was one thing Snape was, besides greasy, it was calm.

"I'll take that as a yes, then."

"How do you know that name?" he whispered.

"I could ask you the same," I replied.

"The Headmaster."

"Tom told me himself, second year. In the—" I looked at Daphne, "um, bathroom."

"Chamber of Secrets," she amended. My eyebrows rose.

"Everyone knows, Harry," she said with a smile.

"Oh," I said. I rubbed at my temples. "Why does no one tell me things like this? I never know what to keep secret...."

"So, who's Tom?" she asked.

"Death Eater," I replied.

"She believes?" Snape asked.

"That Voldemort's back? I suppose," I answered with a shrug. Daphne squeaked.

"Sorry, sorry, Jimmy's back."

"Jimmy?" Snape questioned with a frown.

"She's scared of his name," I replied.

“With good reason,” Snape said. “Miss Greengrass?”

“Dad lost a leg in the first war,” she said from beside me. “He was an Auror.”

“Really?” I asked.

“Yeah,” she said quietly, “Now he’s a pirate.”

“What?”

“At least he thinks he’s a pirate,” she said, grinning at my expression. “I grew up on a pirate ship.”

“Wow,” I said. “I didn’t expect that. You don’t look like a sailor.”

“And what does a sailor look like?” she asked crossly.

“Um, you?”

“Nice save,” Snape murmured.

“What?”

“Nothing,” he replied. “I suggest you all get to dinner.” He undid the spell on Hermione.

“You couldn’t have done that sooner!” Hermione yelled. Snape sneered at her.

“Be happy I undid it at all, Granger. Five points from Gryffindor for disrespecting me.”

“Good evening, Mr. Potter,” Dolores Umbridge greeted me as I entered her office. If I had thought that her classroom was disgusting, her office was even worse. The walls had been painted pink. Doilies with various kinds of dried flowers and such were on every surface, and large plates with moving kittens were hung up on the walls and placed on stands around the small room. She apparently had been

holding back in decorating the classroom. Thank God for small favours.

“Good evening, Undersecretary,” I replied. She smiled at me and gestured to a desk she’d brought in.

“Sit, Mr. Potter.” I looked at the desk suspiciously. Dropping onto my hands and knees, I inspected it. I made sure the bolts were on securely, and the wooden parts were solid. After I’d made sure the desk couldn’t kill me, I sat down.

“So what I am going to do? Lines? Worksheets? Answer fan-mail?”

“...Fan-mail?” She asked. Umbridge shook her head and grinned at me. “Never mind. You will be doing nothing.”

“Nothing?” I asked leaning forward.

“Yes, absolutely nothing, Mr. Potter,” she confirmed, her disgusting smile widening. “I know how to deal with people like you.”

“Nothing at all?” I pressed.

“Yes, nothing!”

“Ok, cool.” I set my chin on the desk and stared at her.

“Let’s see how long you’ll last, you silly little boy.”

“Thank you, I pride myself on being silly.” She let out a little laugh.

“Not for long,” she breathed. “Those who are unstable can’t stand sitting still.”

“How would you know?”

“Trust me, Mr. Potter.”

“We both know how likely that is,” I muttered.

AN: Next Chapter: XVI: Like Marble

Chapter XVI: Hellas, Like Marble

"She's going to be really angry," Tori pressed.

"I'm not lurking around the girl's bathroom to wait for your sister, Tori," I groaned, pushing her forward. "And I doubt Brian wants to either." The boy in question stepped smartly away from the youngest Greengrass girl as she swiped at him.

"Look what you did!" The Irish boy yelled as Tori grabbed at him again. Smiling, I put my arms about the both of their necks and hurried down the empty hall as quickly as I could without killing them. The hallway wouldn't remain empty for long.

"You did that yourself," I whispered to him. "Should have taken a firm standpoint on the lurking. Stop being so wishy-washy." He said something, but his voice was muffled because his tiny, still-developing, inferior, baby skull was pressed into my robes. I smirked and squeezed both of them tighter. "No need to thank me. I know I'm magnificent...."

"Lemme go!" Tori yelled. Her normally loud voice was muted the rough black cloth. Ulster made a similar comment on my other side. I tossed a glance over my shoulder, my eyes settling for an instant on a painting devoid of movement and continued on. Tori yelped again, tickling my side with the vibrations.

"Stop it," I said, looking down at them. "That tickles."

"No!" They both replied.

"Suit yourselves," I muttered, pushing them in front of me and knocking their heads together. As expected, they reeled back, rubbing their noggins and steadied themselves on my outstretched arms. I grasped their wrists and hauled them forward. "Onward we march!"

"You're unhinged," Ulster muttered, "draggin' us about like this."

"There is very much a method to my madness," I whispered seriously as we neared an intersection. "Or at least a reason for it." They started at my sudden change in tone. Checking both directions, we crossed the hall. They were no longer struggling, but looked up at me curiously. At least they knew when to be quiet. Pulling a door open and ushering them into an empty classroom, I locked the door and faced the two Slytherins.

"My Quidditch team is a' coming, so we got a' leaving. I skipped out on tryouts for the new Keeper in order to hang out with you guys." I set a rickety wooden chair against the latch. Ulster squinted up at me. Either he didn't believe me or he was disappointed at the lack of true danger.

"How do you know they're coming?" he questioned. All right, he didn't believe me. Running from Quidditch teams was apparently the most fun he had ever had at one time.

"There are only two people I've met that can make fat guys run that fast, and they are Gryffindors Beaters, Fred and George Weasley," I replied, gesturing with my index finger. The two third years stared at me blankly.

"Fat guys?" Tori asked.

"Yeah, you know," I answered, holding my arms out to the sides, "large, plump persons of the male variety."

"We know what a fat guy is," Ulster said. "Where did you see them running?" I rubbed my chin and crossed to the other end of the room and sat behind the teacher's desk. Throwing my feet up atop the desk, I stared at my two underlings and gestured with my wand.

"Thieves and spies and other like villains cannot compare to me," I said. "Why should I tell small children such as yourselves such valuable information?"

"I'm not small!" they both yelled. I rubbed my chest and turned up my nose.

"Pssh, that's like me saying that a monkey is smarter than I am," I replied. "An outright lie by the way. No monkey is smarter than I am." Tori giggled, just as the sound of people echoed in the hall outside. Without thinking, I fired off a silencing charm at the girl. The invisible force knocked her onto her bottom. I froze. Tori yelled at me her face turning red, but no sound escaped. The people outside continued on, unaware of our presence. Tori stomped over to me, ripped my wand from my grasp, and threw it over her shoulder. I followed its flight path closely, watching it land on stone floor and rolling to a rest near the back wall. Tori waved her arms about and screamed at me. I looked at Ulster.

"She knows we can't hear her, right?" Tori stopped yelling and yanked my hair.

"Ouch!" I batted at her hands, yelping obscenities.

"That's what you get for having girly hair," Ulster said, watching me struggle with getting Tori to let go. I flipped him off with one hand while pulling Tori forward with the other. I licked her nose. The girl opened her mouth in a silent scream, literally, and let go, wiping at her face. I stood up held Tori back.

"Now Tori, you realise that I can't undo the spell unless I have my wand, correct?" The girl stopped struggling to get at my hair and folded her arms across her chest, turning her face away from me.

"Ron's what?"

"Yeah," Fred and George both said. The three chasers nodded as well.

"...wow, so that explains why he wanted a new broom," I muttered.

"Maybe if you'd have shown up for tryouts then you would have seen it coming," Angelina groused. "You're supposed to listen to your captain."

"Guys... you see... there was this thing... there was this really, deathly important thing I had to do," I replied.

“Oh?” Katie asked.

“Yup.” I nodded rapidly.

“I see, well playing with your prick doesn’t constitute a valid excuse, Harry,” Katie said. She folded her arms across her chest and glared at me something vicious. “Angelina should suspend you.”

“Ooh,” I whispered to Fred and George, “can I have her for my payment guys?”

“I thought you said you were taking the gold?” George asked.

“Yeah, well, um, I lied?” I shrugged.

“Well Katie’s not exactly ours,” Fred said. “I don’t think she’d appreciate it if we just gave her away as payment.”

“What?” Katie asked angrily.

“Harry wants us to pay him in virgins, but he won’t accept Ginny. He’d like you instead,” George said. The girl blushed, but I couldn’t tell if it was in anger or not.

“What do you want, Harry?” She ground out, grabbing at me. Alright make that angry. I hopped back and hid behind the big red couch. Alicia stopped Katie from chasing after me. I stuck my tongue out at the sixth year. Katie struggled in her friend’s grasp.

“Regardless of Harry wanting Katie’s virginity or whatever, Ron’s the only Keeper that we could muster up with any sort of potential,” Alicia said. “Someone is going to have to train him.”

“Yeah, well we haven’t got anyone like Wood,” I said from behind the couch. “And you guys have more experience than I do. So I guess I’m out.”

"You're so lazy," Angelina grumbled, sitting on a desk. "I think I should suspend you."

"G'head, who else are you going to use as Seeker?"

"He has a point," Katie admitted, her face still red. "I say we make him train Ron."

"Where is our little brother?" Fred asked looking around. "I can't seem to spot him."

"He's asleep," Angelina said, looking out the window at blue-black darkness of the early morning. "Like we ought to be."

After Ulster, Tori and I had found Daphne wandering about the castle looking for us, I walked with them to their common room. Daphne had only been slightly surprised that her sister couldn't talk. Ducking into the library on the way back, I had asked Madam Pince for the book but it hadn't come in yet. She had said to come back tomorrow sometime. Disappointed, I wandered around the castle alone, exploring and such, when I fell asleep on the moving staircase. It was like a rocking chair or something, I swear. So after I woke up, I made my way to the tower with all haste and found the Quidditch team waiting for me in their nightwear. After I had gone through all the trouble of avoiding them, they still found me. It's like I had bad luck or something.

The nightclothes bring up another reason for asking Katie as payment. She had nice legs and her short-cut lavender coloured nightie showed them off delightfully. I didn't dare comment though. Katie saw where my eyes were, nevertheless, and started towards me, her face blotchy with rage. Feisty was one thing, homicidal though... that was hot.

So I'm a psycho.

Sue me.

"You shouldn't be upset," I called back as I hopped over the side table. "I'm like famous or something. It's high praise."

"I'm going to kill you!" she yelled.

"I thought we were friends!" Katie repeated her previous threat again. I paled and ran quicker. "Someone stun her, she's actually going to kill me!"

Fred and George dissolved into giggles as the chase picked up, and to be honest, the common room wasn't large enough to facilitate a first-class chase scene, so it ended rather quickly. I tripped over my own feet and ended up on the ground with Katie standing over me.

"Well," she said, "any last words?" I nodded, licking my lips.

"Your taste in undergarments is most agreeable," I said, smiling as she jumped away from me. I stood up and brushed myself off, staring at the rest of the team. "I'm fine, don't help. I was nearly murdered, but I'm ok now. Bastards...."

"It's your fault," George said, controlling his laughter. "You shouldn't have mentioned your income."

"I'm only a little out of it at the moment, guys," I replied, rubbing at my temples. "Fucking staircase."

"What say you, Katie," Fred grinned. "Care to act as payment? Anything you owe us will be cleared from our records."

"What do I owe you?" Katie asked, setting her hands on her hips.

"Second year," George began smartly, "you asked us to help you with your Charms homework. You didn't help us back. That same year, you lost your owl. We found him, but did not receive compensation for the trouble. Third year, you bet on the Slytherin v. Ravenclaw match, Ravenclaw lost. You went away on vacation the next day. You still owe us fifteen galleons. The list goes on and on, dear. That's only a few."

"Wow, I wonder they've got on us," Alicia whispered to Angelina. George turned her way and opened his mouth.

"We don't want to know," Angelina said, cutting him off.

"Fine," Katie said stiffly, "but only because I don't have the money and I really don't want to write a letter explaining this to my mum." I choked on my own spit.

"Wow, you guys really deliver." They bowed. George looked up at me.

"We owe you a lot, Harry. So what's a virgin or two between business partners, eh?"

"What were you thinking betting that much on that match?" Angelina asked Katie. The girl in question shrugged.

"I was sure Cho was going to get the snitch."

"You obviously over estimated the Ravenclaw chasers, I mean we were young and still managed to trounce them," Alicia said. "Much less Slytherin, they'd been winning the cup for years...."

"So I didn't want to lose to those idiots," Katie scowled and pointed at the twins. "Big deal."

"Well, score one virgin for Harry Potter," Fred announced. "Katie Bell you owe us nothing."

"Give her a week, though," George said. "I guarantee she'll need a favour of some sort."

"All I need now is a cave, treasure, and a suit of magical armour," I muttered. "Or a sword or some sort... yeah, a big magical sword. Oh and Def Leppard as well."

"You're absolutely insane," Katie said. I shrugged.

"So Umbridge thinks," I replied. "I just do it to mess with people. I think.... How can you tell the difference?"

"I have no idea," Katie said. "Nor do I want to know."

"Now that the transaction is complete," Fred announced, "can we get back to the Ron dilemma? Harry you can hide Katie in your cave later. We really don't want to lose the Cup this year."

"I don't have a cave yet, guys," I huffed. "The market is terrible."

"So, do you plan on getting started on McGonagall's essay today?" Hermione asked me as I sat down for breakfast. I paused in grabbing toast.

"Hermione, I finished that yesterday."

"Oh," she said, surprised. I grinned.

"Why, did you need help with it?" Hermione blushed.

"N-no, what made you think that?"

"It's because you asked him if he was going to start it, instead of telling him to," Ron said. "You always tell us to do things, but you don't us ask if we want to do them." Hermione stared at the redhead. Ron shrugged and went back to eating.

"I have to go to the library again today anyway, so we'll see," I told her, a superior smirk on my face. "If anything, I can let you copy... mine. My smile widened as Hermione's cheeks flushed.

"No you can't," Katie Bell said as she sat down next to me. "My idiot friends sent me to tell you we've got Quidditch practise after breakfast." I frowned.

"I thought you and Alicia were going to train Ron up today?"

"Oh we are," Katie said, "but we're going to have practise as well." I sighed. God damn it all. That ruins my plan for today. If I know Angelina, and I do, we'd be out there for half the day running drills and trying to get Ron into shape.

"I hate you. I hate Angelina too and maybe Wood as well," I told Katie, as I looked her over. Something was wrong. She was wearing dark pants and a blue and purple sweater, underneath which I could see a lighter blue undershirt. I leaned back and looked at her again. Yeah, something was wrong. "Hey! Why aren't you wearing that dress I gave you?" Katie brows knitted.

"I'm not wearing that thing!"

"Why not?"

"I'll look like an idiot," she growled. I gestured at her with my fork.

"Hey, hey, hey, you belong to me now," I said. "So you can't complain."

"What?" Ron and Hermione asked at the same time.

"Don't be jealous," I said slipping my arm around Katie. The girl squirmed away from me, but I wrapped my other arm around her and leant my head on her shoulder. From down the table a ways, Fred and George exploded in laughter. Alicia joined them after a moment. "She's all mine."

"Unbelievable, I thought you guys were kidding," Katie said, staring at her friends. My eyebrows rose, I shifted my head to look at her.

"Do you not take me seriously?" I asked before rubbing my face against her sweater. "Mmm, warm."

"Who gets paid in virgins?" she exclaimed. I rubbed my face against her once more and stared up. She sighed. "Besides you."

"Dragons," I said at once.

"You can't be serious," Hermione said, rubbing at her eyes. "What would possess you do something like this?"

"What am I going to do with more money?" I replied. "It's not like I have a vault full of gorgeous virgins."

“Gee, I’m glad you think I’m gorgeous,” Katie said sullenly.

“Don’t be sad, I’ll buy you a pony.”

“Really?”

“Yeah,” I said. “How much do they cost?”

“A lot,” Katie said, leaning her head against mine. “I guess this might not be so bad....”

“Hah!” I said triumphantly, nearly tipping us over.

“How does this make even the least bit of sense...?” Hermione asked. “Besides, do you even have enough money for that?”

“I’ll ask Remus to get the money from ‘Snuffles,’ ” I said. “He’s all for this whole women thing.” Katie turned so that we were literally face to face.

“Who’s Snuffles?” she asked. Her breath smelled like toothpaste.

“My godfather,” I said, hoping my breath didn’t smell like eggs.

“His name is Snuffles?”

“Hey, blame his parents, not me.” Katie pulled away and made to stand up. I frowned. “And where are you going?”

“To finish my breakfast and get down to the locker room,” she replied. “Don’t you idiots be late. We’ll talk about the pony after practise –oh, now you’ve got me being odd.” I smiled.

“I’m infectious!” She suppressed a laugh and headed back to Angelina and Alicia. Ron stared at me.

“They actually paid you with Katie?”

“Yup,” I said. “They’re good.” Ron looked at his brothers enquiringly.

“Do you think they’d hire me?”

“Dunno, what are you good at?” I asked him.

“I can, um, follow directions, I can make paper hats, and um...” he said. His face brightened as he thought of something else. “Oh! I can read as well. Do you need anyone like that?”

“Ron,” Hermione growled. “You are a prefect!”

“But, but, but girls, Hermione,” he protested.

“Harry is going to give Katie back, aren’t you, Harry?” she said. “...I never thought that I would use that sentence in the whole of my life.”

“It’s only been fifteen years,” I said. “Oh and fuck you, I earned her.”

“Language,” Hermione sniped. “Honestly, I think you try too hard sometimes....”

“I do not.”

“Receiving virgins as payment from Fred and George?” she said. “You would have to think that one out a bit.”

“Not really,” I muttered scratching my head. Hermione took a deep breath.

“So,” she said stiffly, “what do you plan to do with Katie?”

“I don’t know, dress her up, take her out, make her do things for me, sacrifice her if needed,” I said. “You never know when you might need a virgin sacrifice.”

“So she’ll be like a living doll?” Hermione asked incredulously.

“What do you want me to do, marry her?”

“Katie’s a person, Harry, she has rights.”

"Listen here, Hermione," I said, leaning forward. "You can only pick one, house-elf rights or women's rights. Which is it going to be?"

"Women already have equal rights!"

"Do they?" I muttered to Ron. "What happened?"

"Just relax Hermione. Harry's only joking," Ron said. "It's Harry, he won't do anything bad to her." Hermione glared at him.

"Haven't you been paying attention to how he's been— oh never mind...." She trailed off, putting her head down. "I don't know why I put up with this."

"It's because you love me," I said, finishing off my eggs. Hermione grunted.

"Was that a yes or a no?" Ron asked, looking at me. I shrugged.

"I don't speak troll."

"Where do you learn how to speak troll anyway?" Ron asked as we marched down to the Quidditch field, brooms over our shoulders. I shrugged.

"From trolls, I suppose."

"But wouldn't they just eat you?" Ron asked.

"Then you'd be forced to eat them first," I said.

"Either way, you wouldn't be able to learn troll." Ron frowned. "Do you think I'll be any good at playing Keeper?" I figured he was going to ask at some point.

"You want the truth?" I asked. Ron dropped behind. I glanced at him over my shoulder.

“Yeah,” he said after a moment. He moved to catch up with me. “I’d appreciate it.”

“You’re going to be worse at Keeping than an armless baby is at snapping its fingers,” I said. Ron stared at me silently before dropping his gaze to the grass.

“That bad, huh?”

“Yeah,” I said. We continued on to the locker room, Ron said nothing more. I had crushed whatever hope he had before in regards to his ability as Keeper. I noticed he was about to slip on the team robes after he had his pads on.

“We’re only practising, you don’t to wear that.” He stared at me sheepishly.

“Sorry.”

“Listen, Ron, if you’re thinking that I don’t want you here, then you’re wrong,” I told him. He blinked.

“I am?”

“Yeah, what I don’t want is for you to fuck up. Work hard and show some skill and you’ll be worth the effort we’re taking to train you,” I said. “Quidditch is much more mental than it is physical. Sure you see cool acrobatics and such, but you need to think out there Ron. The sky can be a very unforgiving place. I know all you see in it is the respect and popularity you gain. I’ve heard you talk about the game as if you actually knew it. There are some things you don’t understand until you’re out there. This isn’t a pickup game in the yard, Ron. Don’t embarrass your brothers or me.” Ron’s ears turned red, he looked down at the tiled floor.

“Ok,” he said quietly. “I’ll leave.”

“No,” I said sharply. “Get your ass out there.” Ron stared up at me, angry.

"You tell me I'm terrible and that I don't know anything about my favourite game, and now you want me go out there! Why? So that you can see how awful I am?" he yelled. I stared him at him unconcernedly.

"Not really, someone had to cover everything you could possibly mess up before you actually did," I muttered. "I'm going to go see if Katie and the other girls are in the process of getting changed." Ron's brows furrowed as he thought about what I had said.

"Oh," he said. "Wait up then, I'm coming too."

I wiped the blood from my mouth and slumped onto the bed. Fred and George looked concerned, a first as far as I could remember. Ron smiled weakly.

"Maybe I should have been the one giving the speech...." I glared at him.

"What happened?" Madam Pomphrey asked. I opened my mouth, but she stuck a bottle between my lips and tipped my head back. I choked, but downed the sweet tasting medicine. Pulling the bottle away, I tossed it out the window. The nurse frowned at me and fetched another bottle. The entire team was in the ward with me.

"We don't know what went wrong," Alicia told Madam Pomphrey. "We'd been doing a few simple warm-ups just to limber up. He was fine when we were doing push ups and stretching on the ground, but when we got in the air—"

"He got this sick look on his face," Fred said, "and then without so much as word he fell off of his broom and into the stands."

"You didn't break anything, Mr. Potter?" Pomphrey asked. I shook my head, but she pulled her wand out and checked me anyway.

"Listen," I said. "It's no big deal, I just felt really nauseous all of a sudden and let go of my broom. It has been a while since I've flown."

"That should have nothing to do with it," the nurse said. "Well, nothing is broken." She handed me a bottle. "Drink that before you go flying again, but I think you're done with practising for today, Mr. Potter."

"Am I?" I tucked the proffered green glass bottle into my pocket.

"Yes," Madam Pomphrey said. "Do you want me to make you stay overnight?" I shook my head and stood up, placing my hand on the warm stone wall of the Hospital wing. I felt fine now. The team followed me to the doors; I could feel their concerned eyes on my back. I grabbed a bottle of some blue potion off of a rack and took a swig before exiting.

"Harry," Angelina said from behind me. "Do you even know what you're drinking?"

"No," I mumbled, "Do you?"

"...I was hoping that you actually did," she replied.

"Whatever it is it can't be too harmful," I said staring at the shiny blue liquid. "It tastes like strawberries oddly enough." I offered the bottle to her. "Want some?" She declined the offer.

"Your loss," I mumbled heading in the direction of the common room. A nap sounded really good right about now. We trudged all the way to the tower. I couldn't find the willpower to head the library and get my book. It would just have to wait until tomorrow. I frowned, my legs felt heavy all of a sudden. I pulled the bottle from my lips and stared at it. Shrugging, I took another sip.

Katie seemed overly concerned for my health, though. She confiscated my strawberry potion and hid it on her person. It made me want to play treasure hunt. Unfortunately, Katie wasn't having any of it and bound my arms to my sides. This amused the twins greatly. They didn't seem nearly as serious as they had in the Hospital wing. When we reached Gryffindor tower, the Fat Lady allowed us in very reluctantly. We had dirt on our feet or something like that. It upset her. The common room was empty save for Hermione, Ginny and Neville. They were doing homework. I nodded at them with a mumbled

greeting and dropped myself on the big red couch. The team scattered, heading towards their dorms.

“Katie,” I said tiredly. “My arms.” The girl undid the spell. I reached out pulled her atop me before she could move off, searching for my strawberry potion. She didn’t resist. Although she was heavier than I had expected, Katie was soft; not too soft, but just right. Like a pillow filled with dragon feathers. I told her so as I rested my face in her soft brown hair and felt around for the potion in her pockets. Actually, I might have been just feeling in general. I’m not sure.

“Harry,” Katie’s voice said nigh inaudibly as my hands closed around the warm glass of the bottle. “Dragons don’t have feathers.” She tried to keep the bottle away from me, but I succeeded in getting it to my lips. I didn’t I expected it to be empty though.

“You drank it all,” I accused, feeling her face. Her lips were moist. I brought my fingers to my nostrils. They smelled like the potion. My eyes drooped; I was even more tired than before. My head slumped.

“Strawberry is my favourite,” I heard Katie mumble before we fell asleep tangled up in one another.

The hall was long and dark. Candles flickered on the walls, drawing my eyes up towards the ceiling. My feet pulled me down the hall. The paisley wallpaper looked as though it was splotched with blood both dried and fresh. My brows knitted. I looked ahead, my eyes settled on the door at the end of the hall. The Department of Mysteries. I turned around. There was nothing but inky darkness behind me, slowly pushing closer. Eyes widening, I moved on. The door, however, never seemed to get closer no matter how fast I moved towards it. Fed up, I turned and faced the darkness that was slowly encroaching on my personal space and sat down. I rested my head on the wall behind me and waited. The blackness licked at my bare feet, but did not push further on. I stared into it blankly, refusing to move.

“I can sit here until I wake up, you know,” I told the nothing. “This isn’t amusing in the least.” The blood from the wall dripped onto my head. “It isn’t scary either.” Nothing happened. Maybe the ‘dream’ wouldn’t end until it had run its course, like a film or something. Sighing, I

stood up and made for the door. It's not like was interested or anything. When I reached the door, I was surprised to note that it was unlocked. I scratched my head and turned the knob again, opening the door slightly.

"That tricky bastard," I muttered, realising. Dumbledore had, in all probability, locked the door to the Department of Mysteries that day at the Ministry. That was why he wasn't too bothered with me trying to open it. I pulled the door open fully and stared into the Slytherin common room. The Slytherin common from roughly fifty years ago. I sighed and rested my forehead against the frame of the door.

"Maybe if I did drugs, my dreams would be normal," I mumbled stepping across the threshold. "Wait, wasn't that what got me here in the first place?"

It was brutal. He was so cruel and yet still... artistic. Tom Riddle disposed of showiness in a way that made him seem raw and powerful while still having the finesse of a performer. It must have been a paradox of some sort. From behind his smouldering grey eyes I surveyed his work. Ringed around us were at least fifteen incapacitated Hogwarts students of all ages. The ones that were still conscious stared up at us with something akin to terror. Tom Riddle didn't smile; he didn't boast about how easily he had taken them down, we merely looked at each of the fallen boys. Our eyes locked onto the crumpled form of a golden-haired youth, he couldn't have been more than eleven. The boy was still conscious, and although hurt, stared up at us boldly. We walked slowly toward the child and crouched to his level.

"It hurts, doesn't it?" Tom's voice sounded. We examined the child's right arm, it was clearly broken. The boy suppressed a whimper but his look didn't waver. Our head tilted; our hand reached out. The child recoiled.

"Come now, little Rufus," Tom said. "There's no need to be afraid. I won't hurt you any more." Tom's wand flashed forward in our grip, the tip glowing a warm orange. The crunch of bones snapping and a pained howl sounded behind us. Our head turned quickly, and saw Evan Rosier's heavy boot crushing the hand of a Ravenclaw boy. The

boy's wand was gripped in his now broken hand. Evan looked at us. Our head tipped forward in acknowledgment before we turned back to little Rufus.

"You see, little Rufus," Tom whispered. "I tried not to injure them badly. I let them live, when after what you were planning I might not have survived. I was going to heal their wounds and send them off..." Tom's voice rose. "And yet they try to stab me whilst my back is turned, while I'm trying to help one of their own nonetheless." We leant forward, dropping our lips to his ear, so Rufus could see the broken form of his cousin or brother or relative.

"Is that very nice, little Rufus? Is that humane?" The boy shuddered, but turned his head, his hazel eyes shining near silver from the colours of the current scenery.

"Only my friends can call me little Rufus," he growled, his voice squeaky and rough. Our eyebrows rose.

"Is that so, Scrimgeour?" Tom said. We raised the wand again and touched his broken arm. He whimpered, the tip glowed the warm orange colour again. The wand traced down his arm and Rufus' whimpers of pain died away. We mended the bones in his arm.

"Well, Scrimgeour, I doubt anyone of your friends could do that for you," Tom whispered so that only Rufus could hear. "If one can cause pain, he better make damned sure he can take away." Rufus looked from his arm to us. We stood up and surveyed the area. Emma Rosier and Nancy Bones were staring at us stuck somewhere between awe and horror. I crossed to where a teen wearing Slytherin robes lay. He was unconscious. We dropped onto one knee, Tom's wand glowed a stronger white-red colour, almost like a magnesium flare. We fixed the boy's arm as well as his ribs. Tom stopped the first spell and we tapped the teen's head with the wand. He woke instantly and stared up at us. We stood up.

"Get up, Mulciber."

"Yes, sir," Mulciber answered, standing shakily. We nodded at his arm and abdomen.

"Take it easy, the bones won't be firmed up properly for a bit," Tom said.

"Yes, sir. Thank you, sir. I'm sorry, si—"

"You did what you had to," Tom cut in. We spun and made our way over to Evan, Nancy, and Emma. The older Rosier had removed his foot from the Ravenclaw boy and was whispering to the Hufflepuff that he was now courting. Emma was loosely clutching our robes. We rolled down our sleeves and approached her.

"Thank you," Tom muttered, accepting the robe. We slipped it on and laid a hand on Emma's shoulder, turning her from the scene that was arrayed in front of her. She looked up at our face.

"That was...that was...", she began, struggling for words.

"Necessary," Tom grunted. We started up the path back to Hogsmeade. "It was necessary. Evan, leave those idiots, they deserve it." Mulciber hurried to catch up to us.

"That was amazing, Tom." We stared at him. His cheeks flushed.

"Uh, sir."

"Thank you," Tom replied.

"I was wondering if you'd mind teaching me, sir..." We paused and stared at the teen. Mulciber's face flushed further.

"I'm not trying to be pretentious, sir. I'm not doing too well in Defence or Charms, sir. It would really help."

"...I was wondering the same, Tom," Evan added as he approached with Nancy and his sister. "I've seen you do even more fantastic things, but I've never seen you duel before."

"That was not a duel, Evan," Tom growled. "That was a fight."

“I-I’d like to learn as well, Tom,” Emma said. “I’m sure Nancy would as well.” Nancy looked sick for a moment.

“I’d prefer learning how to prevent that, if anything,” she mumbled, leaning against Evan.

“I’d be able to help you out,” Evan rumbled quietly. We shook our head.

“You always want to help, Rosier,” Tom said. “Even when I’d prefer you’d not.”

“It’s because he’s a nice person,” Nancy picked up. “I wouldn’t mind learning how to heal people.” Our lips pulled away from our teeth in a grin.

“Are you sure you can handle that, Bones? It requires studying.” Nancy huffed and looked to Evan. He shrugged.

“Tom’s right. You’re lazy.”

“I hate you guys,” the Hufflepuff said, kicking at the gravel beneath her feet.

“So how about it?” Mulciber asked again. We reached the village.

“I’ll see,” Tom muttered. We turned to Evan. “Hog’s Head?” The tall teen nodded.

“Let’s see if Dumbledore will let us have firewhiskey,” he said with a wily grin. “Or even that muggle stuff he keeps hidden.” We chuckled.

“I doubt he’ll share that,” Tom said. Emma bumped her shoulder against us.

“What?” Tom asked.

“We’re prefects! Where’s your integrity?”

"I must've misplaced it," Tom replied with an easy smile. Evan and Mulciber laughed.

Before we reached the Hog's Head, Mulciber left in order to return early to the castle. Apparently he had left his Potions essay unfinished. The group bid farewell to the fourth year and walked the rest of the way to the tavern in silence. I remember that Hagrid had said something about the pub during my first year, but upon entering the tavern, I didn't see what the big deal was. Given Hagrid's lax standards I'd expected the den of debauchery and sin. Instead what met me was a half-finished bar sparsely populated by Hogwarts students and a few older men.

"I'll get the drinks," Tom said. "You can get a table." Evan, Emma, and Nancy nodded at us and left to grab one near the fireplace. We approached the bar, behind which stood someone that resembled the Headmaster, although younger, and with dirty blonde hair. He looked to be in his late twenties.

"Hey," Tom greeted. "Four butterbeers and whatever you've got cooking, please." The Dumbledore look-alike nodded and glanced at the table the others had occupied. He produced the drinks and looked me over.

"You look like you weren't attacked at all."

"You knew?" Tom asked. The bartender nodded.

"It wasn't my place to tell you, Tom."

"So you say, Dumbledore," Tom replied. "If you want, you can go fix them up. I'm not going to." Dumbledore's brows knitted together.

"How badly did you do them?" We shrugged.

"Badly enough." Dumbledore tried to keep from smirking but failed. He poured four bowls of some soup and set some bread on a platter.

"I told them it was a bad idea."

“Oh?”

“Do you think I wanted to go out there and fix those idiots up in this cold?”

“You’re a peculiar guy, Aberforth. Who knows what you’re into,” Tom said with a grin. We gathered up the food and brought it to the table, then returned for the butterbeer.

“Firewhiskey?” Tom whispered to Aberforth Dumbledore. The man shook his head.

“Ministry fellow, third table.”

“At least I tried.... And about the incident, Aberforth, if—”

“I’ll tell Dippet I know nothing,” the man cut in. “Don’t worry.”

“I don’t mean Dippet. I can handle him,” Tom muttered. “I’m more concerned about your brother.”

“Do you even have to ask?” Aberforth snarled. We blinked and took a step back. Aberforth took a breath and motioned for us to leave. “Go. Enjoy yourself. Pay on your way out.” We nodded and returned to the table, and sat next to Emma. She passed around the bottles of butterbeer. Evan looked at us questioningly. Tom repeated what Dumbledore had said about the Ministry chap. Evan grumbled and glared at the inconspicuous fellow murderously. We smiled and closed our eyes for a moment.

I woke up suddenly, my vision obscured by Katie’s long brown hair. What felt like her nose was pressed awkwardly against my cheek, and she had drooled on my face. I tried to speak, but all that came out were angry snuffling noises. Her hair was in my mouth as well. Slipping my arms under her arms, I moved her slightly. Getting my head out from under her, I looked around.

On the floor before the couch were a bunch of children, probably first and second years. They stared at me struggling with Katie’s

unconscious body, awed. I frowned and stared up at the clock. It was past midnight.

“What are you looking at? Shoo!” The children giggled, as I sat up and drew my wand, but ran off to their dorms anyway. I glared at their retreating backs.

“Finally,” a familiar voice said. I looked at the fireplace; a man’s head was floating in the flames. His dark hair was long and unruly, his face was pale, and a silly smile was plastered on his face.

“Gasp! Notorious mass-murderer and notable Death Eater, Sirius Black,” I said. “What the fuck do you think you’re doing?”

“I’m bored. Molly’s in the bath, Tonks is at work, and Remus is asleep,” Sirius replied. “Amuse me.”

“Ok, so have you heard the one about the Jew, the barber, and the twin elephants?”

AN: I'll be the first to admit, this chapter gave me problems and, as always, I'm not exactly overjoyed at the way it came out.

In case I don't update anything by Monday, I leave you with this.

Hooray for Civil Rights.

Oh and High Point, fuck you. Yes, fuck you, High Point. Build proper roads.

- Frack

Chapter XVII: Escape Artists

I left Katie on the couch and approached the fireplace. Sirius stared from her unconscious form to my dishevelled one with an excited expression on his face.

“Good job! Is her mother single?” he asked. I grabbed the fire poker and nearly gouged out his eyes, but held myself back. I needed him. I dropped the poker and crouched down.

“Hey, Sirius, could you buy me a pony?”

“Um, aren’t you a little old for ponies, Harry?” His brows crinkled.

“Katie wants one,” I replied hooking a thumb over my shoulder. A smile stretched slowly across his face threatening to spread into the flames that wreathed his head.

“To ride?” he asked, raising an eyebrow. Shaking my head sadly, I explained to him how I had come to acquire Katie Bell. By the end of my story he looked as though he desperately needed to scratch his head.

“Explain that part about the Dress Barn and Hermione again,” Sirius said dazedly. I sighed.

“Listen can you buy me a pony or not?”

“Sure, what kind?” I rubbed my chin. What kind of pony did Katie want? We had never got around to talking about it. Sirius began listing the different types, but I honestly had no idea how to pick a pony out. All I knew was that it had to have four legs and a swishy tail. I couldn’t wake Katie and ask her either, because Sirius was a fugitive.

“I’ll send you a letter when Katie decides,” I told him finally. “How’s it been going on at Grimmauld?” He shrugged as best as a disembodied head could.

“It’s been going,” Sirius said.

"That helps me how?" I said gesturing with my left hand. He grinned.

"Not very helpful at all, is it?" Sirius said. "But there's not much to talk about. Dumbledore has no direct influence in the Ministry anymore. We don't have to guard you, so Dung hasn't been by recently. Despite trusting Albus a bit, Amelia Bones doesn't want to even make it seem like she's preparing for war, law enforcement and the Aurors are basically just doing menial tasks. Tonks has been gardening for some retired Auror lady recently. It's all just complete bullshit and I'm bored out of my mind. At least at Hogwarts you get some tail. ...Seriously is her mum single? Does she go for the criminal type?"

"I'm not sure and besides, you're not even a real criminal," I replied. "Oh and classes have been going great, thanks for asking." Sirius laughed, his entire demeanour changing.

"Sorry, sorry, it's this house. It's is getting to me again," he said. "Have you gotten into detention yet?" I nodded.

"Snape or McGonagall?" he asked with a wily grin.

"Neither. Dolores Umbridge," I replied, sitting down completely and crossing my legs. "Umbridge is strange... she's not a Death Eater. I would think that Voldemort has higher standards."

"She's from the Ministry," Sirius said. "Fudge appointed her when Dumbledore couldn't find anyone to take the Defence job."

"I know where she's from. She was at my trial," I replied. "I think Fudge wants her to keep an eye on the Headmaster, but she's pulling for something else. Snape said the Ministry was trying to do more than just watch. They can't, can they? Hogwarts is a private school, right?" Sirius nodded.

"To an extent anyway," he said. "Muggleborn wizards are detected at birth, and if the magic manifests strongly enough, their parents are asked by the Ministry if they would like their child to attend. The same with other families, if anyone from their line has been to Hogwarts they're usually signed up as well."

"So the Ministry handles the muggleborns and the orphans?" I asked. Sirius nodded.

"Figuratively speaking, they're like the United States," Sirius said. "Their hands are in everyone's pants." I chuckled. Katie stirred and made a coughing noise from behind us. I glanced over my shoulder. Her arm had fallen off the couch.

"Don't worry, she's still asleep," Sirius said. I turned back to him.

"So technically the Ministry can meddle?" He nodded grimly.

"I don't even want to think about that," I muttered. I looked up at him. "How's Feste?"

"He's good, he usually hangs out with Tonks though," Sirius replied.

"He was supposed to keep you company, Sirius," I said, annoyed. "Small wonder you're bored."

"I didn't like him when I was a child, and I still don't him now," Sirius grumbled. "Fucking creepy bugger."

"Oh come on!" I groaned. "What's with people, clowns are supposed to be amusing, not scary."

"So...other than class, what have been up to?" Sirius asked, i suppose trying to avoid explaining his fear of clowns.

"Eh, stuff," I answered with a shrug.

"How is that helpful?" Sirius questioned. He smirked. "More girls?"

"Actually, yes," I answered.

"So...."

"Does the name Greengrass mean anything to you?" I asked. Sirius' mouth bent as he thought on it.

“He was a Hufflepuff,” he said after a moment. “Graduated during my first year. He was dating Helena Smith, fifth year Slytherin. Played Quidditch, Beater if I recall correctly. Anything useful there?”

“I just wanted to know if you knew anything about the family,” I said. “I’ve met his daughters, Astoria and Daphne.” Sirius’ eyes widened.

“Three at once, and siblings as well! You’ve got me beat, Harry.” I choked.

“No, no, no, no, no,” I nearly yelled. “None at once, no one at all. I’m unattached. Besides, the one is only like twelve.”

“You sly devil you,” Sirius continued. “I can’t believe you were averse to Hestia a few months ago and now you’re getting fresh with all the ladies.”

“I’m not getting—actually that would be a lie.... Well I’m not actually ‘with’ any of them, Sirius.”

“Fine, fine, be a prude, look for ‘true love’ or whatever. I know that’s what you’re aiming for,” Sirius said. “I rather doubt that she’s going to like it when you’re as inexperienced in the art of ‘love’ as a groundhog is as flying.”

“What the hell does that even mean?” I asked.

“It means you’re missing out, my friend,” Sirius said.

“Yes I’m missing out,” I replied. “Anyway let’s stick to gathering information. Or rather you giving me it.”

“What else do you want to know?” Sirius asked.

“The Department of Mysteries, what is it?” I asked. Sirius blinked.

“Why would you ask about that?”

“Humour me,” I said. “What goes on there?”

“Nothing I know much about. Tonks says the people that work there don’t usually talk to anyone other than people from Internal Affairs. I think they handle the whole espionage deal.”

“Alright, so they’re spies, or agents or whatever,” I muttered. “I’ll look into that later.”

“Why?” Sirius asked.

“Is it a problem?”

“No, not at all, you just go waste valuable time looking up spies,” he said quickly. “Time that could be used to get those girls....”

“One more question,” I said, ignoring his comment. “What do you know about Evan Rosier?” Sirius’ expression darkened. His eyebrows knitted together, his mouth bent into a frown.

“Where did you hear that name?”

“Was he a Death Eater?” I asked.

“No one suspected,” Sirius said. “His mark was on his chest not his arm.”

“And no one knew?” Sirius shook his head.

“If they didn’t have the mark on their arms, they were clean as far as anyone cared.”

“That’s stupid,” I said with a smile. “I would have made them strip, especially the women.” Sirius didn’t laugh. My smile faded.

“He proves how terrible times during the first war were,” Sirius said. “We didn’t realise he was one of Voldemort’s men. He was even married to Madam Bones’ older sister.” My brows furrowed. How did they not know? Rosier seemed to be Riddle’s only real friend at Hogwarts. Surely Dumbledore would have known. Looking at Sirius’ face, I didn’t dare offer Nancy Bones’ name.

“What happened?” I asked.

“Large raid in Wales,” Sirius said quietly. “He took down nearly fifty trained wizards before they killed him. He was supposed to be on their side.” My eyebrows rose.

“He was an Auror?” Sirius shook his head.

“You have to realise that trained wizard didn’t necessarily mean Auror twenty years ago. There weren’t enough to go around. Even then Aurors aren’t always spectacular soldiers. They catch Death Eaters, that’s it.” I looked over my shoulder at Katie’s sleeping form and then to the clock. It was quarter to one. I didn’t need sleep.

“What do you know about the first war, Sirius? How did it all start?” I asked, looking my godfather in the eye. “I want to hear everything for once.” He let out a heavy breath.

“It’s a long story,” he said. I moved closer to the fireplace.

“We’ve got the time.”

“Ouch!” I yelled as Katie twisted my ear. “Lemme go, lemme go! I didn’t do anything!”

“Didn’t do anything, eh?” Katie whispered. “So who was feeling me up just now? You didn’t even have the good sense to get to your dorm before I woke up.”

“But, but, but, my bed is cold,” I whined as I pried at her fingers. “You were so warm and cuddly.” Katie’s eyes narrowed. Her tousled hair and now slightly rosy complexion made her seem more attractive, to me anyway. She twisted my ear again.

“Stop!” I yelled after I realised that yanking at her hand only increased my pain. “Or no pony!” Katie let my ear go. I grinned at her.

“So... I’ll just go now,” I said backing up slowly toward the staircase. Katie stared after me. I blew her a kiss and scrambled up the staircase as quickly as possible.

Once Sirius had explained all he remembered about the first war to me, it was three in the morning. After a few minutes of genial chatter, Mrs. Weasley had pulled him back through the fire and into number Twelve Grimmauld Place. Deciding to think over what I had just been told, I had crawled back under Katie and relaxed. My hands needed something to do while my mind was working, so they amused themselves. I take no responsibility for they had gotten up to.

I took a shower, got dressed, and headed down for breakfast. The Hall was still mostly full, and the number of stares I had been receiving from the students had not dwindled. If anything, they had increased. Spying Hermione and Ron studying and eating respectively, I approached the middle of the Gryffindor table. I sat down between Neville and Ginny. The latter stared at me strangely, her cheeks glowing pink. I turned to Neville.

"Is there something on my face?" He shook his head, and stared at me in awe. I speared a piece of sausage on my fork and squinted at Neville.

"What's with you?" I asked. He looked away from me.

"Oh come on," I muttered turning over my fork and staring at my reflection. "Where'd my nose go?"

"That might help more," Hermione said pointing to my spoon. "But there's nothing on your face." I glanced at my spoon anyway and winked at my distorted image on the shiny surface.

"So what are they blushing over?" I asked, gesturing to the people sitting on either side of me. Hermione smirked.

"Don't you remember passing out with Katie in common room?"

"Speaking of which," I said after nodding. "I've come to realise that females feel rather nice." Hermione raised an eyebrow.

"What did you get up to?" I leant forward and leered at her.

“Why? Interested, Hermione?”

“Not at all,” Hermione muttered, returning her gaze to her open Transfiguration book. “How long was your essay?”

“The required length,” I replied. She looked up at me sharply.

“There’s no way you fit everything McGonagall required in a foot of parchment, Harry.”

“Learn to condense, Hermione,” I said. “Else you’ll sound like an idiot that just copied word for word from the book.” Hermione blinked.

“Condense?”

“Like make the sentences shorter,” I said. Her expression cleared, as if I had just handed her the Holy Grail but filled with quill ink. My mouth twisted up at the corner. Who knew Hermione lacked essay writing skills.

“Thank you,” she said.

“So Neville is awed at my skills with Katie?” I asked. Ron grinned.

“Apparently,” he said. “Congratulations by the way, mate.”

“On what?” I asked.

“Katie,” Ron said.

“Oh, don’t worry about that,” I said. “We just drank some weird sleeping potion is all.” Hermione clicked her tongue while underlining things in her book. I shrugged.

“It tasted good.”

“So you and Katie aren’t—you know,” Neville asked. I shook my head.

“Nah, she just belongs to me,” I said.

“What!” Ginny squeaked. I glanced at her.

“Yeah, I know. I’m a wicked, wicked, boy. Deal with it.” Her cheeks flushed maroon. Oh shit. That’s right, she liked me. I glanced at Ron. He didn’t seem too bothered. Hermione, however, was looking at me sharply. I glanced at Ginny.

“I’m depraved, immoral, and dishonest, you do not want to associate yourself with me. Truly.” I patted her shoulder and glanced at Hermione. She was glaring harder at me.

“Who spread this thing about Katie and me anyway?” I asked.

“Lavender,” Neville mumbled. He cringed. “Don’t hurt me.” I grinned and turned to Hermione.

“Hermione, friend, have I told how beautiful you are recently?” I asked. Eyes narrowed, she shook her head. “Good, because if I did, I was lying. ...Anyway do you want to fight Lavender for me?”

“What?” she asked. I gestured with my fist and an open palm.

“Fight, beat, maul or otherwise maim Lavender Brown,” I said. “I’ll even train you. Like Rocky.”

“Didn’t he lose?” Hermione asked.

“That’s not important.”

“What’s not important,” Daphne’s voice called from behind me. I jumped, dropping my fork with a muted clang.

“Jesus,” I yelped. “You’re a sneaky little snake, aren’t you?” Daphne forced herself in between Ginny and me with a grin on her face.

“Yes, I am,” she said. “So what’s this I hear about you dating that Chaser?” I didn’t bother to pick up my fork; I knew I was just going to drop it again. My eyes traced the long table looking for Lavender Brown. I couldn’t see her. I let out a low breath; at least she had the good sense to avoid me.

“So?” Daphne pressed. I shook my head.

“I’m not dating Katie, per se, it’s more that I own her,” I replied and looked to Hermione. “Even the damned Slytherins have heard. She works quickly.” Daphne elbowed me, scoring a hit right between two of my ribs.

“I take offence to the ‘damned’ part,” she said, “and what do you mean when you say you own her?”

“That’s what I asked him yesterday,” Hermione said. “Tell him it’s immoral to own a person. He’ll listen to you at least.” My eyebrows rose.

“Since when?” I asked.

Just then a single frail-looking black owl swooped down from above the illusion of the clear morning sky and dropped a letter before Neville. It seems that was a cue to the rest of the mail-carrying birds, for they all appeared then. Neville stared at the letter confusedly before pushing over to me.

“It’s addressed to you,” he said. I glanced at it. Indeed it was. My name was written across the front of the yellowed envelope in scratchy print.

“Stupid owl, I look nothing like you, Neville,” I muttered.

“Who’s it from?” Hermione asked, not unrolling her copy of the Daily Prophet.

“Your mother, Hermione, your father has been killed in a violent Russian rebellion,” I said. Daphne and Neville suppressed laughs. I stared at Hermione. “I haven’t even opened it yet. How am I supposed to know who sent it?”

She sniffed and looked away from me. I flipped the envelope and pulled the letter out. The writing looked hurried and ink was smudged in multiple places. It read:

Harry,

I've just gotten word of something from the Ministry. I'm not sure it's true or not, but I thought you should know. I've been told that the Minister has appointed his undersecretary to a new position in Hogwarts. If my sources are incorrect, I'm sorry. Check tomorrow's paper to be certain.

Love,

Tonks

"Hermione, check your newspaper," I said. Tonks couldn't have sent this today. She'd probably sent it out last night. With that owl being old and slow, the letter didn't reach here until this morning.

"Why?" Hermione asked trying to catch a look at the letter.

"Just do it," I said, passing the Tonks' letter to Ron. He read it quickly and stared up at me, eyes wide.

"Hermione, check the paper!" he yelled, even though he sitting right next to her. Ron handed me the letter, which I passed to Neville. His eyes darted up to the staff table after reading. I looked as well. Umbridge wasn't eating her morning grapefruit.... I looked at Hermione. Her gaze was fixed on the Daily Prophet; her expression was growing gradually more horrified as her eyes moving down the print.

"I want to read the letter, too," Daphne whined. "Gimme." I gave her the note, but she didn't seem to be too concerned about Umbridge.

"That doesn't sound good. Who's Tonks?" She asked as she handed me the letter back.

"Friend," I said. "She's an Auror." Daphne nodded and stared at Hermione.

"So Tonks was right, I take it?" Daphne asked me.

“Well it’s either that or her father really died in a violent Russian rebellion,” I said. Daphne laughed, but Hermione didn’t look up from her reading. Ron moved Hermione’s curly hair out of the way and looked at the paper. After a moment he looked up at us.

“What’s a High Inquisitor?”

A knock sounded on the trapdoor of Professor Trelawney’s Divination classroom. The thin professor gestured to me as she wafted about doling out books. Shrugging, I leant down and opened the door slightly and blinked twice at the sight before me. It was our new High Inquisitor. She was here to ‘inquisite,’ I’m guessing. Not good. My body blocked the room so all she could see was my stunned face.

“Hello, Mr. Potter, this is Professor Sibyll Trelawney’s Divination class correct?” The room went silent. I shook my head.

“Sorry, Madam Undersecretary, this is where we grow eggplant,” I said. “Divination is on the ninth floor.”

“Oh?” she asked. “I could have sworn Professor Dumbledore told me to come here.”

“He’s obviously playing you—I mean, um er... he must have made a mistake,” I said, hoping she would believe that I had slipped up. A look of rage passed over Umbridge’s face.

“Yes, thank you, Mr. Potter. It must have been a mistake,” she said, climbing back down the silvery ladder. “Happy eggplant farming.”

“Same to you, Madam.” She looked at me queerly. I shrugged a shoulder and closed the door. Standing up quickly I hauled one of Trelawney’s heavy trunks over the trapdoor and returned to my seat.

“Harry,” Ron said, as the class stared at me, “did you just tell Umbridge we were farming eggplant up here?”

“Would you rather have an inspection?” I asked. I looked around at the silent class and wrinkled my brows. “Does anyone have problem

with that?" The class, along with Trelawney, shook their heads. I smiled and waited for the professor to check my homework and give me a book.

Ron and I exited the classroom when the bell rang somewhere below. We had Defence next. I could only hope that Umbridge had gotten lost on the way to the ninth floor. Ron complained about having to write an essay for Divination as well continue to write his dream diary all the way to her class. When we reached the room, the rest of the class, as usual, was already there and seated. Umbridge, looking harried, stared at us as we entered.

"Do you plan to come in like this every time we have class, Mr. Potter? Mr. Weasley?" I glanced at Ron who was trying to hide himself behind me.

"You realise that we're not late, right?" I asked. Umbridge nodded.

"I realise that, but if the rest of the class can get here early, so can you," she said sweetly.

"The rest of the class doesn't have a special duty to conduct," I said. Umbridge cocked an eyebrow.

"Which is?"

"It's a secret," I whispered across the classroom. "Dumbledore told me to not to tell."

"Did he?" Umbridge said, surprised. "Well, I suppose it's alright then. Take a seat." I grinned and swaggered over to Daphne, tossing my things on the desk next to her. She stared at me.

"I was expecting something more...out there," she whispered, gesturing with her hands. I shrugged and pulled out Slinkhard's book.

"I can only improvise so much in one day," I replied. "Do you fancy a swim later?" She giggled.

"I'm serious," I muttered opening to chapter two of Defensive Magical Theory and setting it down on my desk.

"No you're not," Daphne said. "It's cold outside."

"I'll keep you warm," I muttered so that she couldn't hear.

"I don't have a swimsuit anyway," she continued.

"I don't think you need one," I said.

"What?"

"Just my opinion," I said, holding my hands up. "You can wear mine if you want."

"Hem, hem," Umbridge coughed. "Mr. Potter, may I begin class?"

"No," I said bluntly. "I'm having a conversation."

"About?" Umbridge asked.

"Swim apparel," I replied.

"Would you like another detention, Mr. Potter?"

"Yes please," I said. "Staring at your face for two hours is marvellously relaxing."

"Very well," Umbridge said. "Detention. Tomorrow evening."

"Um," I said, "can you make it tonight? I'm supposed to have Quidditch practise."

"No, Mr. Potter, detention is not a way to wriggle out of your obligations you have to your House."

"Fine, be a bitch," I muttered, folding my arms across my chest. "You're not my favourite anymore."

“Mr. Potter,” Umbridge said breathily. “Would you like another detention for Wednesday as well?” My mouth twisted as I thought on it.

“That might...no, it wouldn’t work. I’m supposed to go fishing that night. How’s Thursday sound?”

“Fishing?” Umbridge said.

“You can’t come,” I said. “It’s invitation only.”

“I do not want to go,” Umbridge said. “And unfortunately you can’t either. Detention on Wednesday night.”

“That’s not good,” I said rubbing my chin. “Whatever, I’ll reschedule. We’ll just go fishing on Thursday night.”

“I thought it was invitation only,” Umbridge said. “How can you reschedule?”

“I’ll just send out new invitations,” I replied with a shrug. Umbridge glared at me.

“Cancel your fishing trip,” Umbridge said. “You have detention with me for the rest of the week.”

“Fishing Extravaganza,” I corrected. “It is a Fishing Extravaganza.”

“It was, Mr. Potter,” she corrected. “It was going to be a Fishing Extravaganza.”

“You’re impossible,” Hermione said as we walked to dinner. “You wasted an entire class period piling up detentions. I was going to ask Umbridge questions about her husband’s ridiculous book.”

“It’s better than sitting through her class, Hermione,” I said. “Who agrees?” Neville, Daphne, and Ron raised their hands.

“Hah,” I said. “You’re beat.” Hermione scowled at us and hurried ahead to the Great Hall.

“She just doesn’t want to admit that I’m cooler than her,” I said. “It’s only two weeks of detention anyway.”

“I think it’s the sexual tension,” Daphne said. “You can cut it with a dull blade.”

“Huh?” I asked. “Hasn’t she gone through menopause like twice? How can Hermione be sexually tense? And ‘you can cut it with a cucumber’ paints a more vivid picture, sexually speaking.” Daphne laughed, but Neville and Ron looked confused.

“Harry,” Neville said tentatively, “what’s menopause?” I frowned.

“Daphne can explain, she’s the one with the uterus.”

“What’s a uterus?” Ron asked, rubbing his chin and staring after Hermione.

“Harry?” Daphne asked. “Do I really have to explain?”

“Fine.” I sighed. “I was calling Hermione old, guys.”

Dinner passed with nothing noteworthy occurring. It was after dinner and Quidditch practise, when I was poring over my shiny new copy of *Shadowed Pasts*, that I found something noteworthy. The family Gaunt had new members. I. Gaunt had two sons, now with names! Marvolo and Henry. Henry had died at age five. Marvolo, however, had lived a long life and produced two children. Marvolo was Tom Riddle’s middle name, and if that didn’t clinch it, there was more. He had one son named Morfin and, here’s the most noteworthy part, he also had a daughter named Merope. The date of death for Morfin Gaunt was August 11, 1972. For Merope, however, the date of death was uncertain. Her body was found in a London morgue some time circa 1930. It gave no indication if she had given birth or had even been married, but there was no one else on the timeline that could have plausibly given birth to Tom Marvolo Riddle. It would explain why Riddle had grown up away from the magical world. Lord Voldemort was of the family Gaunt. I grinned triumphantly at the book and looked up. The common room was empty. I glanced at the clock.

It was nearly midnight. Making a final note in my muggle notebook, I shut Shadowed Pasts and stood up.

"I feel energetic," I said to myself. "I think I'll drop off the book and take a lap around the school."

I exited Gryffindor tower and started off for the moving staircase. I rode one set of stairs down, hoping it would stop somewhere I could use to reach the library. As I should have guessed though, midway through the trip the section of stairs decided it wanted to go up instead. I stepped off and entered the door that was in front of me. There was no way I was going to get back on that thing. It might not have finished its upward trip yet and try to go through the roof next. I followed the empty stone corridor to its end. I hadn't been down this hall before. There was only one smallish wooden door at the end. Hopefully it would lead to a set of immobile stairs.

"Headmaster?" I muttered as I stepped through the door, my brows furrowed. The door opened out onto a stone balcony that overlooked the Forbidden Forest. Dumbledore turned.

"Mr. Potter?"

"Headmaster?" I asked again.

"Mr. Potter?" he repeated. Oh right, Dumbledore was even more bonkers than I was. The old man waved his wand and the forest before me vanished with a muted 'pop.' Dumbledore looked from me to the book in my hand. I stared at the inside of the clock tower. I glanced at him, but his eyes shifted to my forehead.

"That's pretty nifty, Professor," I said, gesturing behind him. "The forest thing."

"Yes, I suppose it is," Dumbledore said slowly. "My predecessor, Headmaster Dippet, taught me how to do it." He stared at my book.

"What's it used for?" I asked

"Hmm," Dumbledore said. "Oh, nothing Headmaster-y, Mr. Potter, if that is what you are wondering. Purely recreational it is."

"Thank you, Master Yoda," I muttered. Dumbledore clacked his tongue.

"Nonsense, I am much taller," he said. "My ears are not that large, either." I cocked an eyebrow.

"You've seen Star Wars?" I asked. He shrugged.

"Who has not?"

"Right," I said. "I'll just get going then." As I turned, Dumbledore must have caught sight of the title of the book, for he sucked in a sharp breath.

"I was under the impression that we had lost that volume long ago, Mr. Potter," Dumbledore said as I started down the hall. I stopped and looked at him.

"Then Madam Pince ordered a new one," I said. "Is it a problem?"

"Harry," Dumbledore said, his brows wrinkling. "It is not commonly known, but the person that stole that book from Hogwarts' library was Tom Riddle. You can see why I'm curious."

"Yeah, I suppose. I mean a muggle in Hogwarts?" I asked. Adjusting his cracked spectacles, the old man exited the clock tower and closed the door behind him.

"My apologies, it was Tom Marvolo Riddle who appropriated that book," he said.

"He couldn't have," I said. "I'm holding it right here." Dumbledore ignored my comment and continued ahead, motioning for me to catch up. He looked at me, actually looked at my face. I stared back.

"What made you look for that volume, Harry?"

"The title came to me in a dream," I answered. Dumbledore nodded slowly.

"What kind of dream?" he asked as I caught up to him.

"The night-time kind, Professor," I said.

"Just the title, Harry?" Dumbledore asked. "Are you certain?"

"No," I replied. "I am not certain."

"That could be a problem," Dumbledore muttered.

"Well in that case, I am certain," I replied. He glanced down at me, a smile playing at his mouth.

"Do you treat Professor Umbridge like this during class, Mr. Otter?" My eyebrow twitched.

"My name is Potter, not Otter, Professor," I said. "And I'm worse in class."

"That explains the pile of detention slips on my desk," he said. "My hands would appreciate it if could try to hold back next time."

"Once I get started I can't stop," I said with a shrug. Dumbledore chuckled.

"Your father was the same way."

"I bet I can beat him," I said.

"In all probability," Dumbledore said, "you will beat him after a few more classes with Professor Umbridge."

"Stop calling her Professor," I said. "She hasn't taught me anything."

"Oh," the Headmaster said. "And just because she hasn't taught you anything she doesn't deserve the title?"

“Yeah, I suppose that’s about right.” I said, pausing at the door. Dumbledore shook his head. He opened the door and motioned for me to exit.

“You remind me of my brother sometimes, Mr. Potter,” he said. “Try reading Mr. Slinkhard’s book. You might learn something.”

“You’re staying here?” I asked. Dumbledore nodded.

“I fancy a look at what the Unicorns are up to tonight,” he answered. “Their habits are most interesting.” Nodding, I crossed the threshold and stepped onto the section of staircase that was still docked there. I tucked Shadowed Pasts under my arm as the staircase moved off.

“Harry,” Dumbledore said from the doorway, his eyes fixed on the book, “what exactly did you find in there?”

“Voldemort’s mummy,” I answered.

AN: It'll be a bit until the next chapter, to let you know.

XVIII: Grapevine Fires

Chapter XIII: Grapevine Fires

“Have you ever taken a piss in the sink?” I asked Brian as we turned left down the corridor of the sixth floor and started up the stairs to Ravenclaw tower. The young Slytherin lad looked up at me.

“Now would you think about that for a second, Potter,” he replied with a not-so-subtle gesture to his right. Tori was climbing the stairs next to him looking quite grumpy. She had refused to be un-silenced by her sister, me, Pomphrey, or anyone that in contact with her. I grinned at my young Irish companion.

“What’s she going to do? She still can’t talk.”

“That doesn’t mean she can’t hit me,” Brian replied.

“You’re a wimp. I just wanted to hang out, little mate,” I said. “You know share stories and experiences and such.”

“And I just wanted to follow Tori and get a new Quibbler from Luna,” he said.

“You read through all of those already? Eh, I suppose when you’re a stuck up, sheltered, scaredy-cat, reading the Quibbler is the edgiest you get.”

“Fine, I haven’t taken a piss in any sort of sink, Potter and I’m disinclined to ask why you have,” Brian said throwing a hesitant glance at Tori.

“I never said I did,” I answered with a grin. He looked up at me, unconvinced. My smile widened. We reached the seventh floor. Tori yanked the door open and stomped down the hall. Brian and I followed.

“What’s her problem?” I muttered. Brian snorted and made sure the girl was out of earshot before facing me.

“You cursed her,” he whispered. “Tori’s very sensitive like that.”

"What a baby," I muttered. Brian shrugged.

"She liked you," he said. Tori opened a purple door and stepped through. Brian and I caught up and followed her through.

"Oh joy, more stairs," I said. "Who needs the friggin' gym?" Ascending the wide stone stairs, we soon reached a painting of a crossword puzzle that took up an entire wall. I pushed my way ahead of the two Slytherins and stared at the painting.

"Sweet, I'm a pro at these," I said. "Uh, let's see, four across is...transvestite." Tori elbowed her way in front of me and pulled out her wand. Placing her tongue between her teeth, she began to fill out the crossword by drawing letters with her wand. Brian and I watched.

"This is really stupid," I told Ulster. He stared at Tori's progress.

"How so?" he asked quietly.

"You would fill this out every time you needed to get to your dorm?"

"Good point," Brian said with a nod. Tori was about halfway done. I pinched her nose and grabbed her wand.

"I'm telling you, girly, four across is transvestite." I wrote the word in. Tori snatched her wand away from me, but she didn't look angry. Brian stepped up and grabbed her wand.

"Ten down is Uilleann pipes," he said scribbling the word in.

"This isn't so bad. We're all having fun," I said with a smile. "Five down is red herring." I grabbed at Tori's wand but she slapped my hands away. She wrote the word in.

"I wanted to write it," I whined. "Erase it. It's my word."

"It's two words," Brian said. "Three across is nursery rhyme, write it in."

"Erase red herring," I grumbled. Tori ignored me and filled in the final word. The painting swung forward. I stared at it suspiciously.

"You would think that the common room would be more protected. Unless they think we're not intelligent enough to solve a crossword puzzle," I said.

"That angers me," Brian said, looking up.

"Forget pissing in the sink," I said. "Let's piss all over their common room."

"What did you do?" Hermione asked me as I fell onto the big red couch in the Gryffindor common room. Ron looked up from his chess game and greeted me. I turned my head and brushed the hair out of my eyes.

"What did I do when?" I asked Hermione, pressing my face into the cushion. "I've been busy." Hermione made a huffing sound, but didn't question me further. I frowned. That's oddly disappointing. I rolled over and stared at her.

"I took a leak in the Ravenclaw common room just now," I said. "All over their surprisingly small bookcase." Hermione choked and looked up at me from her place on the carpet. Ron moved his chessboard away from her.

"You did what?" Hermione asked, dropping her quill and clenching her fist.

"Um, nothing," I said. Ron snorted but choked it down before it turned into real laughter. Hermione took a deep breath and returned to her writing. Ron waited a moment before sliding the chessboard back in front of her. Idly, Hermione moved a pawn.

"Since when does Hermione play chess with you?" I asked Ron. He shrugged.

"I told her it relieves stress."

“Does it?” I asked. Ron shrugged.

“I’m not quite sure yet,” he said, “though she hasn’t attacked either of us so far.”

Hermione didn’t say anything, but gathered up her things and moved off to a table. Ron stared after her.

“Hermione, we’re not even half way in!” he said. “Come back.” The girl didn’t respond. Ron turned to me.

“Wanna pl—”

“No,” I responded. Ron frowned and rubbed his chin.

“Please?” he asked. I stared at him.

“I’m going to lose,” I replied. “Why would I want to play with you when I’m going to lose?”

“I don’t complain when you do what you want to do,” he said, crinkling his brow.

“That is because usually what I want to do is fun.”

“Chess is fun,” he said. “It’s very, very fun.”

“If you have no sense of real fun then I suppose it is,” I said, “but as I know what fun really is, chess is not remotely near real fun. D’you get it?”

“No,” he replied shaking his head.

“Let’s play Monopoly,” I said.

“Huh?” Ron asked, staring at his chess set.

“It’s a game about money,” I answered. He looked up quickly.

“Money?” he asked. I nodded.

“Ok, let’s play,” he said.

“It’s in Hermione’s trunk,” I said. “Go ask her for it.” He packed up his chess pieces and approached Hermione’s desk.

I rolled onto my back and waited. Either he’d get the game, or he’d get punched. I rather doubted that Hermione was in the mood for Monopoly. It was to my great surprise then, when I heard Hermione slide her chair back and rush up to her dorm. Ron walked back and stood over me.

“She’s going to get it,” he said excitedly. “How do you play?”

“You buy things,” I answered. Ron stared at me.

“That’s it?”

“It’s much more complicated than it sounds,” I said. Hermione returned with a box and Ginny.

“So let’s start,” she said. “We’ve enough people now.” I sat up.

“I’m the banker,” I said, standing. “Wait for me, I need to get changed.”

“Changed?” Hermione asked. I nodded.

“I need to get my outfit. Monopoly is serious stuff.”

The next few days passed without incident. I went to class normally, ate my meals, did my homework and had my detentions with Umbridge. They weren’t as boring as one might imagine. Umbridge was a horrid person, no doubt, but she was the type that couldn’t keep quiet. Even though I wasn’t to speak, she would rant about this thing or that and I would nod and make agreeing noises here and there. Now that she was High Inquisitor she had a looser tongue. It was apparent that she didn’t like magical creatures even though she looked like some kind of pond creature herself. She also didn’t like meat or the food that house-elves prepared. She had asked for foods that weren’t handled by them. Umbridge had spent the last night’s

detention preparing for the inspection of Professor Grubbly-Plank, but as the woman was only interim-professor, Umbridge wasn't as excited at the prospect of maybe firing her.

So it was on the morning of Grubbly-Plank's inspection that I woke up at four thirty-five. After stretching I laid in bed too warm and lazy to get up. The sun hadn't risen completely; the light that was streaming through the windows was a pale purplish-blue. My hand felt about under my comforter for what I had been reading the night before. It closed around the slim volume and pulled it out.

"How to Knit a Sweater/Scarf combo in Thirty-Seven Easy Steps," I read. It was a lie. The steps didn't seem easy at all. And knitting was supposed to be relaxing. I opened the book and began from Step Eight again.

Neville's alarm rang out at six thirty, at which time everyone scrambled out of bed and headed for the showers as quickly as possible. There were only so many showers and about fifty Gryffindor males that had to be washed. After I had taken my turn and dressed, I left the common room with Neville to head down to breakfast. We had nearly reached the entrance hall when we were approached by a group of Ravenclaws. I raised my hands up.

"It was an accident," I said instantly. "I knew I should have taken my medications." Neville blanched. Slowly, he raised his arms as well.

"What d-did you d-d-do," he stuttered quietly from beside me.

"You'd rather not know," I muttered out the corner of my mouth.

"We can hear you," one girl at the front said. She had strawberry blonde hair and freckles.

"It's ok," another voice said from somewhere within the mob. "You guys can go. I'll be there in a minute." A girl emerged; she was tall, taller than I was, and slim as well. Her face was pleasant, I'd say beautiful even. It was Cho Chang. My former crush's dark hair was cut shorter than I last remembered though.

“Hey, Cho,” I greeted, angling one of my still raised hands. “Haircut?” The group of Ravenclaws rumbled with whispers.

“Go,” Cho urged the blonde girl. She frowned but motioned the others to follow her to the Great Hall. I lowered my arms, but Neville didn’t.

“I-I think I should go now, so see you, Harry,” he said, trying to slip away. My hand shot out and grasped his collar.

“You aren’t going anywhere, Neville.”

“So,” Cho began, looking at Neville. The teen blushed. He tugged at my hand. I glared at him and used my other hand to twist his ear. He still tried to pull away. I let his ear go.

“Fine, stand over there,” I said and pointed to the opposite wall. Smiling, I turned at Cho.

“Had a good summer?” she asked, moving closer.

“Technically it’s still summer. At least until next week,” I said with a shrug. She smiled.

“I didn’t know that.” I shrugged again.

“So new haircut?”

“Kind of, I got it cut in June,” Cho said. My brow wrinkled.

“Oh, sorry, I didn’t notice with all the...” I trailed off as I saw her face grow sad. “How are classes?”

“Oh, fine, I suppose,” Cho answered, her expression clearing up. “Umbridge is just horrid. I doubt I’m going to pass my N.E.W.T. in Defence, or Potions for that matter.”

“That sucks,” I replied. “I don’t find Umbridge that bad, but it could be because I spend at least two hours with her everyday.” Cho laughed.

"I heard about that," she said, calming down. "It seems like you're not letting... everything bring you down."

"Everything?" I asked. My eyebrows rose. "Down? Darling, I only ever go down of my own accord." Cho laughed again, louder.

"See," she said. "That. You're still...still..." She trailed off. I grinned.

"Heroic," I said with a smile, "yeah, I know." She stepped closer and leant against the wall.

"I suppose that's a quality you can't lose, no matter how much you seem to change, huh?" she asked.

"I guess," I said taking a step back and staring up at the ceiling. I looked back down and started forward to the entrance hall. "Sorry, but I'm really hungry." As I passed her, she nodded...sadly? I motioned to Neville.

"Unless you don't mind talking on the way to breakfast," I called, turning around. Cho smiled a bit and moved to catch up. Neville and I waited for her. When she caught up and we reached the entrance hall, Neville glanced at me.

"So what did you do to make the Ravenclaws mad?" he asked, avoiding Cho's gaze. When I shrugged, Cho repeated the question herself. I blinked at her.

"I wasn't there," she clarified. "Marietta didn't see fit to tell me what happened."

"Ah, the blonde girl," I said with a nod. "That's probably for the best, actually."

"I figured it must have been really awful," Cho continued. "Usually Marietta can't wait to scoff at you."

"She sounds nice," I said. "Like that cat Mrs. Figg had. The one that would nibble on my socks until they had holes in them."

"I remember those," Neville said. "They looked like gloves, only in reverse." I nodded.

"But most notably, they allowed my toes wiggle-room," I added. "Like Jell-o."

"Alright, just one question then," Cho said with a grin. "Do you really take medications?"

"Um...no," I said with a shake of my head. "No medication."

"Good."

We reached the Hall shortly, where Neville and I parted from Cho Chang. Neville seemed much less nervous now that the pretty girl had left for her House table.

We sat down next to Ron, who was sitting across from Hermione, who was sitting next to Ginny, who was sitting across from Fred, who was eating a bowl of oatmeal with peaches.

"How's dinner going," I asked them as I set my schoolbag on the table.

"It's breakfast, Harry," Ron said. "See, bacon." He gestured to his plate.

"How do you know it's not Breakfast for Dinner Day?" I asked. "I've been fooled by it too."

"Oh...", Ron mumbled, staring at his plate. "That's not good."

"You've got to train yourself, mate," I said. "Constant vigilance and all that. Know your meals."

"Can't you at least wait until it's actually dinner time to spout this nonsense?" Hermione asked. I frowned. Ron's face cleared and he looked up towards the ceiling.

"Come on Hermione, you just ruined it," I said. "I really had him going. And what happened to breathing exercises and ignoring my antics?"

"I've realised that, despite my best efforts, ignoring it doesn't make you stop," she replied. "Besides, I've got no one else to play Battleship with." I blinked rapidly at her and turned to Neville who was nibbling on a stick of butter.

"Was that humour?" I asked him. "From Hermione? Question mark?" The teen looked uncertain.

"It might have been," he said. "I didn't catch what she said." I snatched the butter away from him and sniffed at it. It smelled like normal butter.

"It tastes like honeydew, I reckon," Neville said. I grabbed a butter knife from Ron and cut a bit off. Bringing the knife to my lips, I licked the butter. It did taste like honeydew, despite the near lack of flavour that a honeydew possessed. Strange. I took half the stick and returned the remaining half to Neville.

"I was right, wasn't I!" he said. "I knew I wasn't catching insanity off of you...oops."

"Not a problem, Neville," I said with shrug. "If I were you I'd worry about being me as well."

"I worry as it is," Hermione muttered. "Honeydew butter! What next, Lamb flavoured syrup?"

"Aunt Petunia talks to herself like that sometimes, Hermione," I said. "She's a crazy bitch, and since you used to have horse teeth and all..." Hermione glared at me. I held up my hands. "Just saying."

"I'd prefer you'd not," Hermione said, returning to her eggs.

"I don't know Harry, I think they were more like rabbit teeth," Ron said, wiping his mouth and pushing his empty plate forward. "We've got Herbology next, right?" I nodded. He fished his schedule from within

his bag and checked the rest of the day out. Hermione dropped her fork and stared at Ron's plate.

"That's all you're having?" Hermione asked disbelievingly, ignoring the remark about her teeth. Ron nodded and patted his stomach.

"Gotta stay trim for Quidditch."

"How's that going, anyway?" she asked me.

"Well, I suppose."

"You suppose?" Hermione asked.

"He skips practise regularly," Ron said, not looking up from his schedule. I nudged him.

"Not around the fans, Ron," I whispered. "They might actually think I'm skipping practise or something."

"But you are skipping practise, Ron just said so," Hermione said.

"Shh!" I pointed at Ginny and the little girl that was sitting next to her. They blushed synchronously. "Fans, remember?" Shaking his head and packing his bag, Ron stood up.

"I'm going to wait for you guys in the entrance hall," he said. "Don't be too long, will you?" He shot one last longing glance at the omelette in the centre of the table and struck off for the double doors. I shrugged and moved down the bench to give myself more room. Ginny glanced at me, overcoming her blush.

"So, um, Harry, I saw you talking to Cho...", she began, staring at my fingers.

"Yeah, Neville and I were walking with her," I replied. "She's got a new haircut."

"That's old news," Hermione said, looking up from her eggs. "I'm surprised you didn't notice before."

“Sorry if I thought it best to leave her be, Hermione,” I said. “Being the only witness to her boyfriend’s murder and all.”

“Well, she is interested in you,” Hermione said. “I don’t know if I could stand you if I were in her place. Mind you, I’m already having trouble.”

“What do you mean interested?” I asked. “She hasn’t approached me until today. Besides, her friends are telling her to stay away from me.”

“Hah!” Hermione said triumphantly. “That proves it. What with that rumour about you and Katie floating around.”

“Proves what?” Ginny asked.

“Cho likes Harry,” Neville said. Hermione stared at Neville. He smiled sheepishly.

“I stole your thunder, didn’t I?” he asked. Hermione nodded grumpily. Neville looked at me.

“What are you going to do?”

“What is there to do?” I asked with a shrug. “I’ll see how it goes. And speaking of Katie she was supposed to get me muggle whipped cream in a can by today. Sometimes she upsets me, you know.” Hermione glanced at Ginny, but quickly looked at me.

“You’ve been after Cho Chang since our third year and now that she likes you, you don’t care?” she asked. I shrugged.

“Is it fucked up that I care more about the whipped cream than this?”

“Yes,” Hermione said, “it is.”

“I figured as much,” I said.

I finished my food in silence and when Katie didn’t show up with my stuff, I questioned Fred on her whereabouts. Apparently the girl had caught a cold or something and was currently in bed. Grumbling

about irresponsible women, I shouldered my schoolbag and exited the Great Hall.

Herbology was, as usual, no fun at all. My planting and watering skills were still not up to scratch after nearly five years of the class. Professor Sprout, despite being passionate about her class and her Hufflepuffs, didn't spend time trying to improve our skills so much force knowledge of every shred of magical flora in existence into our heads. Today we finished off class with the Thorned-Dragon root. Personally, I thought the thorns were overkill. I mean, the thing breathed fire, why the need for thorns? My questions went unanswered though, as Professor Sprout checked her timepiece and allowed us out. It was ten to eleven. I grabbed up my bag, dropped my gloves in the box and headed out of greenhouse number five. Ron and Hermione followed.

"We've got ten minutes to walk around the castle," I called back, "and Umbridge is inspecting Care of Magical Creatures today."

"That makes a difference, why?" Ron asked as he caught up to me. I shrugged. "I prefer Umbridge ask me the questions rather than Malfoy and Parkinson. Ferret-lad is still upset that his daddy didn't give him the go ahead to attack me."

"What!" Hermione exclaimed as we trudged across the lawn. I shrugged.

"According to what Daphne heard from Tracy Davis, who heard it from Millicent Bulstrode, who heard it from Anthony Goldstein, who was told by Pansy after they finished up together in the girl's bathroom, Malfoy wrote his father telling him that I beat him up and asked if it was okay to jump me. Malfoy Senior wrote back a week later telling him not to."

"Why would he write that?" Hermione wheezed as we approached a clearer path. "Isn't he usually okay with whatever Malfoy does? Why would Malfoy even ask?"

"Aha! That rumour tells us three things," I said, lifting my index. I fished a clay pipe from my pocket and placed it between my teeth. "Hermione, number one?" She stared at me strangely but answered.

"Okay..., Malfoy's father is busy," she said. "Or else he would have answered Malfoy sooner."

"Correct," I said, as the site of our Care of Magical Creatures class came into view. "Taking care of a picky bastard like Voldemort is hard work." Ron squeaked something feminine. I grinned.

"What else does it tell us, Ron?" I asked, looking at him. His brows wrinkled as he thought on it.

"He needs you for something," Ron said, "or else Malfoy wouldn't have asked his father." I nodded.

"Correct," I confirmed, "but, it might mean he needs Malfoy for something and doesn't want me to maim his son. My battle skills are something to be feared." Hermione snorted.

"Sure, Harry," she said. "You're good, but Death Eaters aren't afraid of you." I ignored her. Death Eaters were one thing, but their children were another matter entirely. I'm sure I could trounce Malfoy in a fair fight. I shrugged. Whatever.

"What's the third thing, anyone?" I asked. Ron shook his head.

"I dunno."

"Voldemort is planning something?" Hermione whispered with a shrug as we neared the clearing. The Slytherins, who had just come from within the castle, were already seated around a pen filled with the twig-like bowtruckles. A few Gryffindors from our Herbology class had beaten us to class and were seated on the other side of the pen. I turned to Hermione and smirked.

"Nah, it tells us Pansy Parkinson is doing Anthony Goldstein in the fourth floor girl's bathroom," I said loudly, right as we passed Parkinson and Malfoy. Pansy flinched so hard she fell over. My grin

widened as I spied Umbridge talking to our substitute teacher. We approached the Gryffindors; Ron and Hermione sat down next to Dean. I gave Ron my bag and headed for my favourite High Inquisitor.

“G’morning Madam,” I called as I approached the conversing pair. It’s always best to let Umbridge know you’re approaching in advance. She’s jumpy. Jumpy. Frog. Toad. Get it? Umbridge paused in asking something and turned her droopy eyes towards me.

“Good morning, Mr. Potter,” Umbridge said. “What is the problem?”

“Problem? There’s no problem, I thought I could be of service to you this fine day,” I replied. Umbridge stared at me hard for a moment.

“Why?” she asked.

“Bowtruckles bore me,” I answered. “Besides, I don’t have detention anymore and I hardly get to see you.”

“Very well, Mr. Potter,” she said slowly. “You can help me ask questions.”

“Okay,” I said. “Do I get a clipboard as well?”

“No, you do not get a clipboard,” Umbridge said. She turned to Grubbly-Plank. “You may start class whenever you wish, Professor.”

AN: If the chapter doesn't seem complete, that's because it isn't.

I have no clue what I'm doing at this point. Long term-wise, anyway.

Don't be surprised to see some changes to the whole story sometime soon.

Probably major changes.

Just a reminder, watch Dollhouse tonight, 13 Feb 09, on FOX.

Chapter XIX: Smile

The village of Hogsmeade was a quaint little place. There were rows of houses and shops and a little park that by this time was already in disuse. The inhabitants of the picturesque little town were older, middle aged or heading towards senility, and it was for that reason that the streets were adult-supervision free on our second Hogsmeade weekend. Anything below sixteen degrees made their bones ache, or some such bullshit.

The air was cold and dry, signalling that autumn would be abandoning us for winter earlier than expected. I steered the wheelchair down a side street and away from the commercial area that students usually visited. Zonko's and Honeydukes and the pubs didn't interest me anymore. All right maybe not Honeydukes, but I was over Zonko's and Madam Rosmerta's bosoms. Katie started as the wheelchair trundled over an extruding cobble. Shushing her, I pushed the wheelchair towards a lone row of houses.

"I can walk you know," Katie said. "You can let me up." I looked at her sadly and sucked the mucus from my nose down into my throat.

"You," I said quietly, "are desperately sick. If you were to walk who knows how long your legs would hold out."

"I have a cold!" Katie exclaimed. "You even caught it from me."

"Hush," I said. "Are you an expert on diagnostic medicine, Katie? I think not."

"Neither are you," she replied. I jerked my head at the solitary houses.

"Guess where I'm taking you?" I sang. Katie shook her head wildly.

"No," she said. "There is no way that I'm letting you take me to some whack-job witch doctor. I just have a cold."

"Then why haven't you escaped?" I asked. "If you just have a cold, that is."

"Because you tied me down, Harry." Katie crossed her arms and sighed. "Fine, take me."

"Now?" I asked, clutching my chest. "Why, this is so sudden, I can't wait to tell the guys." Katie scowled and grabbed my shirt, pulling me down swiftly so that my chin collided with the steel of the wheelchair. My upper and lower teeth met sharply, and my knees hit the cobbles. Cussing furiously, I stood up.

"Like seriously, Katie?" I asked, rubbing my mouth. "You want to break my jaw or something? Maybe cripple me for life?"

"Just minor trauma," Katie said. "Now take me to the doctor."

"No," I said, folding my arms. Katie stared at me levelly before shrugging.

"I'll just go by myself, then."

"You're in a wheelchair," I replied. "Cripple."

"You're an idiot," Katie replied, and with that she grasped the wheels and started for the houses. Success. I stood there for a moment, smiling slightly, and when she showed no sign of stopping or waiting for me, I called out:

"Get off my wheelchair!"

Katie had a cold, and as they were highly contagious I had one as well. The old woman that Brian had recommended gave us some cough drops and a glass of water each before ushering us out of her house lest she become sick as well. By this time it was nearly one o'clock, and we were supposed to meet Hermione in the square. Apparently the girl had cooked up some kind of plot to assassinate Umbridge or something. I disapproved on principle, Umbridge was my favourite teacher. You just don't take part in assassination plots like that, I knew her better than any of the professors I'd spent five

odds years with. The deepest pit of hell is filled with betrayers and mutineers, be warned.

“What’s her plan, then?” Katie asked as we walked into the town proper. I shrugged. The intricacies of Hermione’s plan were still a mystery. It couldn’t be too dangerous or risky; else Hermione wouldn’t have thought of it. Poison was out as well, because for all of Hermione’s house elf love, she was still uncomfortable about asking them things. Katie eyed me.

“She didn’t tell you?” My mouth twitched a little. Katie sighed.

“You weren’t listening?”

“Katie,” I said, “I was doing homework.”

“Yeah,” she said, hauling the wheelchair along behind her, “because that’s more important than dealing with Umbridge.”

“Maybe it was.” I had been doing homework, not exactly my homework per se, but homework all the same.

“So why are we going then?” Katie asked as we passed the Three Broomsticks. “If you don’t care about Hermione’s idea, it probably means it’ll fail.” I cocked an eyebrow at my second favourite chaser. She thought I was smart?

“Que?” I asked.

“What?” Katie said.

“Exactly,” I returned. “What did you mean by that?”

“You’re good at plotting,” she said.

“Oh,” I said and felt my cheeks heat up a bit. Only I could take a comment about being some sort of criminal mastermind as praise. Katie smirked at me. Scowling, I jerked my head towards the post office and parked the wheelchair outside.

"You're a right vixen," I said. Katie didn't reply, but kept the pleased look on her face as we entered the post office. It wouldn't stay there much longer. The post office was small, but there were some boxes for rent, and I'd done just that on our previous Hogsmeade visit. Inside it was a small package: To Harry Potter; From: Dudley Dursley. Grinning, I motioned to Katie who was checking out a few owls at the counter.

"Let's go find Hermione," I said. "Get on the wheelchair."

"Why?"

"Just do it, woman."

Hermione was waiting just outside Honeydukes with Ron. The redhead was sitting at her feet and eating candyfloss from a large bag. The other prefect didn't look too pleased with him. Upon seeing me wheel Katie towards them Hermione nudged Ron and hurried towards us.

"Good," she greeted. "You were almost late." Ron approached us and handed me a paper sack.

"Got your stuff," he said. Thanking him, I eyed the candyfloss.

"New stuff?" I asked. Grinning, Ron nodded. Hermione frowned.

"Yes, and he had to purchase the extra large bag, too," she said. Ron smiled weakly.

"I'll pay you back," he said. "Eventually." Hermione huffed and gestured for us to follow her.

"I hope we get there first," she said. "I don't know what kind of turnout to expect."

"Whoa, whoa, whoa," I said, stopping and dumping my things on Katie's lap. "Turnout? What are you going to do, Hermione?" Bringing any more people into some half-ass plan was not going to end well. Hermione wasn't much of a team player, anyway.

"We're going to the Hog's Head to meet a few people," Hermione said. I squinted at her. Aberforth Dumbledore's tavern was the Hog's Head.

"Do you know what you're doing?" I asked. "Because if I go to prison for this assassination shit, I'm giving you up immediately. I'll fold like an Iranian housewife."

"Wha—never mind," she said. "We're not going to prison, Harry."

"Hopefully," Ron muttered. Hermione glared at him.

"There is a chance," he defended. "I mean, what if Umbridge finds out?"

"She won't," Hermione replied. With that she clammed up and led the way to the tavern. I debated on leaving all the way there, but Katie was set on seeing what Hermione had in mind. My possessiveness needs no explanation.

Hermione stared up at the building hesitantly. No sound escaped from within, although the building didn't look very sturdy and the windows of the tavern were caked with grime, so we couldn't see inside. Hermione glanced up at the rusty sign that hung above the door with a grimace. It was a boar's severed head leaking faded crimson blood onto a white tablecloth. Ron looked back down the road nervously.

"Well," Katie said. "Open the door."

"Hermione..." Ron muttered.

"Oh, just do it," she said.

Ron pulled the grubby door of the Hog's Head open and held it until we all had entered. It wasn't out of politeness; he was just scared to go inside before Hermione and me. I saw him glance around nervously again before following us. Unfortunately, the exterior was cleaner than the interior, but not by much. The floor was hard packed earth and was covered in sawdust, as if it was a butcher's shop

instead of a tavern. The walls were bare, and the air smelled of vomit and alcohol and something farmlike.

"Christ," I muttered, after clearing my nose of snot.

"I'll say," Katie said, breathing shallowly. I clapped a hand to my forehead.

"I forgot," I moaned.

"Forgot what?" she asked. I plucked the package Dudley had sent and steered Katie over away from the door.

"Oi, they're here," Fred Weasley's voice called. I glanced up and cursed. The pub was packed, well almost packed. There was a good number of people, twenty at least. Aberforth, the bartender was an old man who looked very much like a grungy, unwashed Albus Dumbledore, albeit with a beer belly. Ron let out a whistle as his apprehension dissolved. I cursed again. This wasn't going to go unnoticed. I turned the wheelchair away from the crowd and opened the packaging. Katie protested, but I shushed her and pulled out the item I'd waited a week to get my hands on. I motioned Ron over and had him stand between the crowd and us.

"What's that?" Katie asked.

"A sticker," I replied.

"A sticker?"

"I don't need an echo," I muttered and applied the large sticker to the wheelchair. "All right, done."

"Done?" Katie asked, just for spite. I grinned at her and adjusted Ron's head so that he could see the sticker.

"...where," he began. I set his head on Katie. Ron's jaw dropped; "No way...!" I smiled widely and shook my head.

"Then why?" He gestured at the sticker.

"They don't know that do they?" I asked, hooking a thumb over my shoulder.

"What?" Katie asked. "What does it say?" She leaned over and tried to see the sticker, but I set her straight and wheeled the chair towards Hermione. The bushy headed prefect was standing in front of the group and beaming. Katie struggled to see the sticker, but I draped my arms about her, set my chin on her head, and pulled up alongside Hermione. Ron grabbed a pair of chairs and sat in his.

"Having fun, Hermione?" I asked. "Feel like packing it in now?"

"Hush, Harry," she whispered. "We've got to do this."

"No we don't," I said. George stared at Katie strangely. He cocked an eyebrow at me. I shrugged the best I could and turned her wheelchair sideways. He snorted.

"Smooth, mate," Fred said with a laugh. Katie thrashed about trying to see the sticker.

"Sit still," I said. "You'll hurt yourself."

"Let me see," she growled. "Or I'll kill you. Twice."

"That's what Voldemort said," I muttered. "I'm still here aren't I?"

"Not for long," George said. Hermione groaned and glared at me.

"It always has to be about you, doesn't it, Harry?" she asked. I looked at her innocently.

"I'm not stopping you, Hermione," I said. "You're just more interested in my conversation than getting booed by this crowd. Check this sticker out."

"No," she said firmly. "We're getting started."

“Finally,” Brian’s voice called. He emerged from the back of the assembled group of retards and approached me. “You’ve wasted a half hour of my time already.”

“Why are you here?” I asked the third year. “More importantly, how did you survive?” He was the only one wearing Slytherin colours. The small boy shrugged and said:

“Luna.”

“Ah,” I said, standing on my tiptoes, but holding Katie back. I caught sight of the blonde girl sitting at the very back of the crowd and sipping a butterbeer. “G’morning Luna.” She hummed something in response and waved at me. Then again, from the faraway look she had, Luna could have been slapping at a fly. Brian sat in the other chair Ron had pulled up as I didn’t plan on letting Katie go. There was a solid chance she’d knock my nose in if I did.

“He’s nuts,” a Hufflepuff boy said. He had a pinched sort of arrogant to look to him. “He really is.” I nodded.

“I really am,” I said. “You can leave now, if you want.”

“Harry!” Hermione said. “No he’s not. Sit. Sit!” A few people had gotten up with the Hufflepuff boy, among them the Ravenclaw girl that didn’t like me. I noticed Cho was present and was staring at me intently. My eyes settled on the Hufflepuff lad’s Tornadoes badge instead of her. Hermione managed to calm the group down and no one left.

“So,” Fred said once the outspoken Hufflepuff was being held down by Hannah Abbott. “How’re we going to go about this?”

“And why are we here?” another Hufflepuff boy asked. They were pretty obnoxious for a crowd of ‘hardworking’ friendly people. Hufflepuffs were supposed to be pleasant and chaste, like the ginger with the plait who was sitting nervously with her hand on her wand.

“Well,” Hermione began, glancing at me glancing at her. “It’s about fixing a problem we’ve recently acquired at Hogwarts”

“Herpes,” I put in, “everyone’s getting it.” The twins and few of the seventh years laughed. Even Katie chuckled a bit. Hermione glared at me.

“No,” Hermione said. “I’m talking about Defence. You’ve all realised that the cumulative Defence grade isn’t what it used to be.”

“Not that it was that high before,” I muttered. Hermione looked at me poisonously.

“What, we’ve got Goyle and Crabbe in our class,” I defended. She shook her head and forged on.

“Some of you know this already, but I thought we could get together and study Defence Against the Dark Arts. It’s bound to be more effective than the tripe Umbridge is teaching us,” Hermione said, spitting out the last few words with distaste. “I mean actually learning the spells and in-depth theory.” I made hand motions to illustrate her points and ended with a pigeon flying away. Brian, who had been watching Hermione attentively, glanced at me with a frown.

“Stop it,” he hissed. I snorted, but dropped my hands to Katie’s chest. She sighed, but didn’t stop me.

“So you want to pass your O.W.L as well,” a skinny Ravenclaw lad asked. Hermione agreed with him, but after shooting me a long look continued.

“Erm, it’s not just grades, even though they seem most important,” she said. “We have to learn to defend ourselves, because, erm, Lord Voldemort is back....” Articulate, Hermione, articulate. However, the reaction was immediate. Drinks were knocked over as people yelped and twitched and shrieked. It was like reverse Tourettes or something. A few caught themselves and stared directly at me. I licked Katie’s head and stared right back.

“What’d you do?” the chaser whispered after her own fit had ended.

“I licked your hair.”

“Why?” Katie exclaimed.

“It smelled like watermelon,” I muttered.

“You’re an idiot,” she groaned.

“I love you, too.” Hermione began to say something about how she was going to run this study group, which I admit was a better idea than trying to get Umbridge fired or killed, but was cut off by Marietta or whoever, who asked for proof of Voldemort’s return.

“Professor Dumbledore says—”

“Touch your toes,” I muttered in a bored voice as Hermione told them what Dumbledore believed. The haughty looking Hufflepuff stood up and pointed at me.

“Dumbledore takes his word for it,” he said. “And he’s a loony.”

“Nah,” I said. “That’s Luna.” A few of the girls twitched and looked at Luna nervously, but the fourth year was busy making scratches on the table with a penknife. The boy snorted.

“Yeah, sure,” he said. “I suppose we’re supposed just assume that story’s correct. Voldemort just showed up and offed Diggory.”

“That’s actually how it went,” I said, unblinking. “By the by, what’s your name?”

“Zacharias Smith,” he said. “And I want to know what really happened, if we’re to believe you.”

“Let me do an interpretative dance then,” I drawled. I removed myself from Katie’s person and stood up. I drew myself up as much as I could and pulled my wand. Making one hand into a raptor claw, I waved it about and flicked my wand at Smith. A bolt of green light, not nearly as bright as the Killing Curse, shot towards him and crashed into his drink, turning it into jelly. Frowning, I stared at Smith.

"My aim was off," I said. "Well, you get the general idea."

"That's illegal!" the boy yelled, nearly falling over. "Are you trying to kill me?"

"Harry!" Hermione yelled. "Are you crazy?"

"No," I said. "No, I'm not." Katie gasped something and before I could register my mistake, her fist met my jaw with a dull thump. Reeling, I grabbed Brian's chair to steady myself and glanced up at Katie. She had seen the sticker that I'd put on the wheelchair.

"Surprise," I said weakly. "Isn't it funny?"

"Baby on Board?" she said, much to the amusement of the twins, Alicia, and Lee Jordan. "Since when am I a minivan?"

"What's a minivan," one person asked.

"It's an automobile," Hermione answered. "Harry, Katie, solve this later, please."

"Come on," I said. "I planned this out, you know. I thought you liked that about me?" Katie paused and stared at me incredulously.

"I didn't want to be victim," she said.

"It was all in good fun," I said. "You're not really pregnant."

"I knew that!" Katie yelled, her face bright red.

"Oh," I said. "I wasn't sure you did." I was trying hard not to look at Cho Chang. Katie took a deep breath and sat in the wheelchair again.

"Let's let Hermione finish up," she said. "Then I'll deal with you." As she said this she looked at Alicia, Lee, George, and Fred as well.

"Oi, we didn't do anything," George said. "Deal with Harry, not us." Hermione was also red in the face by now. She was trying to control

the reactions of not only Zacharias Smith and the bartender and the other customers of the Hog's Head, but Katie, Fred, George, and me.

"All right," I told Katie, "What do you want?"

"What do you mean? Take this bloody sticker off!"

"That's it?" I asked. "Nothing else?" I waved my wand and vanished the sticker.

"Happy?" I asked. "That's two weeks of planning, doing Dudley's Spanish essay and a weeks pay."

"You did all that for this?" Katie asked. Fred and George beamed.

"That's our boy," they chorused. "Doin' it right, he is." Hermione sighed and sat down.

"Sit, everyone, please," she said. I winked at the twins and inclined my head to Hermione.

"All right, Hermione, tell us your plan," I said and motioned for everyone to sit down. More than half of them stared at me confusedly until it was explained by cohort (Ron) that I had saved them all from doom many a time. Then their looks became angry.

"So you think you can boss us around because you got your ass handed to you by You-Know-Who?" Zacharias Smith asked. I liked this guy.

"Nah, I think I can boss you around because I killed two thousand men with the jawbone of an ass," I said. "Or was that Superman? Samson? Spiderman?" He stared at me for a second in disbelief. My mouth kept moving, tossing out names at random.

"Loony," Smith muttered to himself and sat down. The rest of the rebellious Hufflepuffs and Ravenclaws sat down with Zacharias. The Gryffindors stared back at me nonplussed. I shrugged at Hermione.

"They know scripture for some reason," I told her. "You deal with them."

"Please," Hermione pleaded. "Let's just get this done quickly."

"Fine, fine, Hermione," George said, gesturing for the Gryffindor group to sit down. "We'll act our age."

"Lee, where're the nappies?" Fred picked up. "I'm thinking Hermione and Ronnie could take turns changing them as they give us the run down on their scheme." The assembly broke out with laughter as Lee conjured a pile of cloth diapers and the twins donned a pair over their robes. A cleverly bandaged figure sitting at the bar twitched hard at the twins dialogue and Brian made an annoyed sound and glanced up at me.

"I happen to find them inspiring," I said simply.

"Sometimes it seems like you work off of each other," Katie muttered. She had taken a seat in the wheelchair again and was staring up at me bleakly. I dragged my sleeve across my face, wiping my nose, peering over my sleeve I said ominously:

"I work alone."

"I heard this morning," Katie replied. "Sound effects and everything."

"Blow me," I snorted.

"I think you've got it covered," she returned.

"Ouch, walked right into that one, didn't I?"

"Pretty much," Katie said, a slight smile tugging at her mouth.

"So for this to work I figured we'd meet at a preset location at an agreed time," Hermione said to the crowd, her back to the bar. Aberforth glanced at his patrons, muttered something and disappeared into a small side door. My eyes narrowed.

"Hurry it up Hermione," I said loudly. "My antelope are on the turnpike." The girl looked at me strangely, as did the crowd, but she continued her speech at the same speed.

"...I'd make up lesson plans during the week and after making sure that I knew the material," she said. "I'd teach it to you." Zacharias frowned and stood up.

"What about him?" The Hufflepuff pointed at me.

"I'm fifteen, almost-single, and like to play with my duckies in the bath tub," I said swiftly. "That's me." Smith didn't look amused.

"What about him?" Hermione demanded.

"Shouldn't he be teaching us?" a lad named Boot or something said.

"Are you serious?" Hermione said, having to hold in her amusement. "Harry?"

"Yes?" I answered promptly. Hermione glared at me.

"Don't respond," she grunted.

"All right, bossy boots," I mumbled. Smith stared at me hard.

"You thought he was crazy only moments ago," Hermione said. "Why would you ask that?"

"He killed a man with jawbone of an ass," a smallish boy said. "He obviously knows what's what."

"That was a joke," Hermione said shocked.

"He nearly killed Zacharias without a word," the nervous looking ginger said. I glanced at her. She smiled weakly. "And he fended off a Death Eater this summer." I cocked an eyebrow.

"Who's she?" I asked Katie.

“Susan Bones,” the redhead replied. Katie looked a bit miffed at being cut off.

“Related to Madam Bones?” I asked, knowing the answer already. The girl nodded.

“She’s my auntie.”

“Auntie Bones seems to be a barren old bitch,” I said. “She wouldn’t even get me bathroom break. I nearly pissed all over her stand.”

“Nearly?” Smith asked suddenly.

“My pants were on backwards, see,” I replied, grimacing. Smith snorted in amusement.

“So what happened?” the small Ravenclaw said.

“Name?” I asked finally.

“Michael Corner,” he replied.

“Well, little Mikey,” I said. “I fought a Death Eater, and ran away scared when the Aurors came.”

“You were chased by Aurors?” Lavender blurted out.

“Yeah,” I said. “It was stupid easy, don’t worry.”

“Then what happened?” her constant companion, Parvati, asked.

“I bought some meth off of this whore’s best friend’s uncle’s kiwi’s sister who cooked it up in her bathroom and got smashed,” I said. “Woke up four days later in Vietnam.”

“I thought Tonks picked you up?” Ron said.

“She might have,” I said slowly. “In Vietnam.”

“Where’s Vietnam?” Susan Bones asked.

"Hell," I replied.

"Hell?" Hermione said.

"Don't worry, we're all going there," I said.

"All right, Harry," Hermione sighed. "Can we get this done with?"

"It's your show," I said. "I'm just here because you said you'd pay for lunch."

"Right," Hermione said, turning to face the crowd as Ron unfurled a scroll and laid it on a table. "I will be teaching the lessons. Anyone that wants to attend please sign up, if not I'd like you like to keep this quiet." Everyone stood and signed up. I scribbled my name onto the sheet last, near the very bottom. With that done, Hermione rolled up the parchment started the exodus. Aberforth still hadn't returned. I approached the bar and sat next to the bandaged man. He'd been scribbling things onto his bandages furtively throughout the entire meeting. He jumped when I set a hand on his shoulder and pressed my wand into his neck.

"Give Umbridge any names," I muttered, spilling his drink onto what he had written, blurring the ink, "and I'll kill you like that small child I ate last night. And the night before that. And the night before that..." I stood up and backed away, continuing with repeated the phrases as I kicked open the door and left the Hog's Head.

Next:

Chapter XX: Lunacy

Thanks for reading. And see the top note for my fanfiction panhandling of sorts.

- Grover

CHP20